To my family
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This dissertation explores the limits of cross-cultural dialogue through an engagement with the project of comparative political theory (CPT). Broadly understood, CPT seeks to expand the purview of political theory by calling for a dialogic engagement with non-Western perspectives and traditions of thought. CPT scholars endorse dialogue on the grounds that it fosters greater cultural tolerance, egalitarian norms, and respect for the ideas and traditions of historically excluded non-Western peoples. My dissertation explores the roots of CPT’s faith that dialogue and comparativism can provide an antidote to Orientalism, Western triumphalism, and the will to dominate. Specifically, I argue that CPT cannot distance itself from Orientalism simply by calling for greater dialogue and cosmopolitan pluralism. CPT, I contend, largely assumes that a commitment to dialogue and comparative knowledge will necessarily issue in more sympathetic and enhanced understanding. In turn, this prevents it from paying sufficient attention to the risks inherent in any cross-cultural encounter, and particularly cross-cultural encounters that occur under conditions of structural inequality and against the backdrop of immense economic, political, and military asymmetries.
My dissertation sheds light on these dangers by turning to the case of the Human Terrain System (HTS), a military program that embeds academics with U.S. troops in conflict zones to serve as cultural advisors. Designed to support the United States’ counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the goal of HTS is to win the hearts and minds of the local populations and to reduce the need for violence. HTS shares certain similarities with CPT. Both projects share an interest in foreign cultures and a belief that increased cross-cultural understanding can minimize, if not altogether eliminate, violent conflict. In this dissertation I use the case of HTS to reveal some of the ways in which cultural knowledge, often unbeknownst to its practitioners, can be co-opted towards less benevolent ends. As such, I use the case of HTS to ask difficult questions of CPT, questions that its proponents have so far avoided.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The great challenge of this century, both for politics and for social science, is that of understanding the other. The days are long gone when Europeans and other Westerners could consider their experience and culture as the norm toward which the whole of humanity was headed, so that the other could be understood as an earlier stage on the same road that they had trodden. Now we sense the full presumption involved in the idea that we already possess the key to understanding other cultures and times.

— Charles Taylor (2011)

This dissertation grows out of a desire to understand what I saw as the unusual amount of interest in the “other” — especially the non-Western “other” — in the contemporary world. Over the past 15 years, a series of events and developments with global repercussions — including the intensification of economic globalization, September 11th, and recent US foreign policy in the middle east and South Asia — have once again placed the question of the “other” at the forefront of contemporary concerns. The dissertation identifies and brings together two “sites” that exemplify, in a concentrated form, this newfound interest in the “other.” On the one hand, I focus on the newly emerging subfield of political theory called comparative political theory (CPT). CPT’s goal is to correct what it perceives as the Eurocentric bias of political theory by opening the canon to previously marginalized non-Western thinkers, ideas, texts, and perspectives. CPT seeks to expand the purview of political theory by calling for a dialogic engagement with non-Western traditions of thought. CPT scholars endorse dialogue on the grounds that it fosters greater cultural tolerance and respect for the ideas of historically excluded non-Western thinkers.

In a second move, I also direct my attention to a controversial program designed by the US military: the Human Terrain System (HTS). The Human Terrain System was
created to support the United States’ counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. The program embeds civilian social scientists with US troops in these conflict zones to serve as cultural advisors. Their goal is to better understand the societies in which they are operating, pacify the local populations, win their hearts and minds, and reduce the need for kinetic operations.

What is the rationale for bringing together these two sites that seem far apart from each other? I already hinted that in comparative political theory I find an example of the theoretical (or academic) interest in the other. The military’s Human Terrain System, on the other hand, exemplifies the practical (or policy world) interest in the other. To discuss these two projects together, therefore, is to bring together theory and practice. But there is at least one other reason that recommends a parallel reading of the theoretical and military interest in the other. Both projects share an interest in foreign cultures and a belief that greater “cultural awareness” and cross-cultural understanding can minimize, if not altogether eliminate, conflict – in other words, that such kind of understanding can ultimately lead to a renunciation of the will to dominate. But whereas one project (CPT) portrays itself as the antithesis of empire and power politics, the other (HTS) draws on the same ideas to facilitate the work of empire.

Against this context, this dissertation explores the roots of CPT’s faith that a commitment to dialogue and comparativism will necessarily result in more sympathetic and enhanced understanding of the other. I show that comparative political theorists make this claim as a way of differentiating their subfield from Orientalism, understood as a broader discourse and scholarly enterprise characterized by the tendency to portray non-western cultures, peoples, and ideas as inferior and threatening to the west, so as
to justify their colonization. Aligning themselves with Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, CPT scholars have explicitly defined their project as an attempt to move “beyond Orientalism.” In this context, going beyond Orientalism implies a movement beyond “hegemonic and imperialistic modes of theorizing” in the direction of understanding the foreign other in a manner that does not reproduce earlier relations of domination. CPT proponents posit two broad approaches that can help scholars effect the “exit” from Orientalism: (1) fieldwork or deep immersion in local cultural contexts and (2) a turn to Gadamer’s dialogic hermeneutics. In both of these cases, CPT scholars tend to endorse dialogue on the grounds that it engenders egalitarian norms and facilitates non-coercive interactions with the other. As such, they posit dialogue as the necessary antithesis (and antidote) to empire, mastery, and domination.

In this dissertation I seek to problematize the easy separation of dialogue and power. To explore CPT’s assumption that dialogue and comparativism can necessarily bring about a more sympathetic understanding, I proceed in a twofold manner. First, I examine historical analogues to current comparativist scholarship. Specifically, I turn to the work of CPT’s most immediate intellectual precursors, namely Raimundo Panikkar, J.L. Mehta, and Wilhelm Halbfass. What is distinctive about their scholarship is that although all three thinkers were deeply committed to the project of cross-cultural understanding, they nevertheless expressed profound doubts about the comparativist enterprise. These doubts, I show, have been extinguished in the current CPT literature. Indeed, there is a strong tendency in the existing literature to equate doubt about the possibility of non-coercive dialogic understanding with the wholesale rejection of said understanding. I argue that such a conclusion is overdrawn. If doubt can be conceived
as our “other,” and if CPT is seriously committed to a dialogic interaction with the other, then it behooves CPT scholars to always keep the door open to doubt, i.e. to the “other.” To put this more clearly, I argue that CPT scholars should retain the doubt that perhaps not all knowledge and understanding is free from power. To do otherwise is to betray the core justification for their project.

The second way in which I problematize the foundational claims of CPT is by taking a closer look at the subfield’s relationship to Orientalism. Specifically, I demonstrate that there are two important consequences that follow from CPT’s peculiar relationship to Edward Said’s work. First, CPT scholars have accepted Said’s negative characterization of Orientalism and, as a result, have similarly come to associate the practice with a hegemonic mode of theorizing in which the voices of the “other” are subsumed within Western categories and evaluative frameworks. Precisely because they accept Said’s account of Orientalism, CPT scholars have in turn sought to distance their own project from the Orientalist tradition that Said critiqued. Given that Said never articulated a clear alternative to the phenomenon he diagnosed, CPT scholars have sought to remedy this omission by proposing immersion and dialogue as effective “exits” from Orientalism. As such, I show that an important corollary of the disavowal of Orientalism is the uncritical embrace of dialogue as the obvious antidote to Orientalism’s hegemonic mode of approaching other cultures.

I argue that their acceptance of Said’s negative characterization of Orientalism has prevented CPT scholars from recognizing that “Orientalism” had multiple guises and manifestations, and contained both imperialist and anti-imperialist impulses and motivations. In addition to being associated with colonialism, in the Western context
Orientalism also assumed the role of gadfly; it represented a “counter-movement, a subversive entelechy...[that] has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power” (Clarke 1997, 9, 27). Taking this into account, I argue that CPT cannot extricate itself from Orientalism simply by disavowing Orientalism, because to do so is to reject that of which it is already a part. Instead, I argue that CPT scholars can find a more productive way of engaging the issue of Orientalism by looking to the work of one of their precursors, namely, J.L. Mehta.

**On Methodology**

In this dissertation, I critically assess the project of comparative political theory by highlighting its relation to the Human Terrain System. I conduct close, interpretive reading of texts relevant to my project. Specifically, I focus on the work of those scholars who (1) have explicitly called for the creation of the subfield of CPT and (2) who identify themselves and their work as falling under the rubric of comparative political theory. Given that the most vocal proponents of CPT to date have been Fred Dallmayr, Roxanne Euben, Farah Godrej, and Leigh Jenco my primary (thought not exclusive) focus is on their respective work.

Besides the aforementioned group, there are many other scholars whose work could be described as falling under the rubric of CPT. In 1999 Fred Dallmayr inaugurated and became editor of a new book series titled “Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory.” As stated on the inside flap of their first book, the aim of the series is to

inaugurate a new field of inquiry and intellectual concern: that of comparative political theory as an inquiry proceeding not from citadel of a global hegemony but through cross-cultural dialogue and critical interaction. By opening the discourse of political theory – today largely dominated by American and European intellectuals – to voices from across the global
spectrum, we hope to contribute to a richer, multifaceted mode of theorizing as well as to a deeper, cross-cultural awareness of the requirement of global justice (Border Crossings 1999).

As of 2013, the series has published a total of 19 volumes that showcase work in comparative political theory. Although I draw on select chapters from these volumes, I cannot discuss here the work of all the contributors to these volumes. In any case, not all of them would identify themselves as comparative political theorists. To gain a better sense of the motivation for the creation of the subfield of CPT, I have chosen to focus on those chapters in the series that explicitly address the need and motivations for cross-cultural theorizing.

In Chapter 6, I draw on several types of sources that have reported extensively on the Human Terrain System. Taken together, these sources provide a variety of contrasting accounts of the HTS program – how it works, whether or not it has been successful – and offer different viewpoints regarding the implications of the program for academic scholarship. My rationale for turning to these sources is that a comprehensive history of the Human Terrain System has yet to be written. In the absence of such an account, the extensive media coverage of HTS has served as my main source of information on the program.

- major print journalism (The New York Times, Newsweek, Time, Economist, etc);
- investigative and alternative journalism (Counterpunch, The New Yorker, Harper’s, etc.);
- blogs and Indymedia, both supportive of and critical of HTS (e.g., Zeroanthropology, Savage Minds, Open Anthropology, Wired’s Danger Room, Small Wars Journal, Culture Matters, etc.);
- reports in military academic journals (Military Review, Joint Forces Quarterly, etc.);
- the official HTS website (http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/);
the Army’s Counterinsurgency Field Manual;

published academic research on the counterinsurgency strategy and HTS;

the official website of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, the most vocal critics of the program (http://sites.google.com/site/concernedanthropologists/);

documentaries on the HTS program (e.g. Human Terrain: War Becomes Academic, etc.)

Students of political theory such as myself are primarily engaged in close reading and interpretations of texts. Of the several contending approaches to textual interpretation within the field of political theory (deconstruction, Frankfurt School critical theory, Straussian approaches, Cambridge school historicist approaches, and analytical approaches), my interpretive strategy aligns itself most closely with the work of Tzvetan Todorov. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on interpretation, Todorov adopts a dialogic approach to textual interpretation. To understand its distinctiveness and what it entails, it is helpful to contrast it to two other types of textual criticism, which he labels “dogmatic” and “immanent.” Dogmatic criticism is an assimilative type of criticism where the reader/critic/receiver appropriates a given text for his or her own purposes, such that in the end only the critic’s voice is heard. Projecting himself onto the text,

the dogmatic critic…does not really allow the other to express himself: he swallows the other whole, since the critic himself embodies Providence, or the laws of history, or some other revealed truth; he allows the other to serve only as the illustration (or the counter-illustration) of some unshakeable doctrine that the reader is expected to share (Todorov 1987, 160-161).

By contrast, immanent criticism corresponds to an effacement of self. Here the critic’s voice is subordinated to that of the author, such that the critic ‘becomes’ that author. In other words, the immanent critic tries to make his own voice as inaudible as possible: “he explains what a work means but does not take that meaning seriously […]
he does not respond to it, he acts as if ideas concerning human destiny are not involved" (Todorov 1987, 160).

Dialogic criticism, for its part, recognizes the author as a subject that speaks, a subject equal to and yet different from the critic who comments upon that author's work. Since meaning arises from the meeting of two speaking subjects or two voices, and since speech requires a response, this makes the emergence of dialogue possible. Dialogic criticism “refuses to eliminate either of the two voices involved” (ibid, 161). Moreover, the critic who adopts this interpretive standpoint speaks not about the works but with them (ibid). Going a step beyond Bakhtin, Todorov acknowledges that dialogic criticism necessarily entails an asymmetrical dialogue between reader and author because the text with which the critic engages is already closed, whereas the critic's text can go on indefinitely (ibid, 162). This is why the critic's first responsibility is to “allow his interlocutor’s voice to be heard with fidelity” (ibid). To do so the critic must first step aside and let the other voice speak. This approach to textual interpretations tries to avoid the two extremes outlined earlier: the self-erasure characteristic of the immanent approach and the domineering stance typical of the dogmatic approach. Following Todorov, I have sought to question, interpret and arrange in new ways the texts discussed in this dissertation. But I have also let them speak and defend themselves (1984, 250).

My dissertation also draws on the insights of Edward Said, specifically his “contrapuntal” criticism. Said borrows the notion of “counterpoint” from Western classical music. As Said explains (1993, 51), “in the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given
to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work.” Counterpoint, therefore, involves the complicating of a single or dominant theme by juxtaposing multiple, contrasting and intersecting voices. The aim is to redress exclusions and demonstrate the interdependence and overlap between various histories and experiences, rather than treat them as isolated phenomena disconnected from the world and from each other. As Said argued (1993: 32), a contrapuntal perspective is required if we wish to “think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.” Such a perspective, for example, can illuminate the connections between quite divergent experiences such as the ones examined in this dissertation – namely, the academic interest in the non-Western “other” as embodied in CPT’s project, and the military interest in the “other” as exemplified by the Human Terrain System program.

**Definition of Terms**

Before moving on to the first chapter, a few words about the terminology employed here are in order. Following the existing literature in this dissertation I use the concepts “West”, “Western”, or “European”, as well as “East”, “Eastern”, and “non-Western” to refer to recent efforts to include non-Western thought into the Western canon. Although I am aware of the limitations of these terms, I nevertheless use them here consciously because they form powerful parts of the CPT discourse. Some, though not all, CPT scholars have expressed their unhappiness with the West/non-West binary, noting in passing the potential dangers of treating “West” and “non-West” as settled categories, as reified entities with fixed boundaries. Such dissatisfaction has led to two
possible solutions. Christopher Goto-Jones, for example, proposes that we do away with these binaries altogether. For Goto-Jones, the current trend of characterizing the project of comparative political theory as the study of "non-Western political thought" not only ends up privileging the spatial/geographical categories of West and non-West; it has also led to the implicit understanding that in order to conduct properly comparative work one must engage with thinkers and traditions of thought originating outside the geographical boundaries of West. The problem, Goto-Jones argues, is that this way of defining the scope of the field works to create and reinforce the impression that there is a radical distance and difference between the so-called West and its non-Western counterpart. In this scenario, “non-Western” experiences and perspectives remain defined in a negative relation to Western thought.

An alternative to Goto-Jones’s suggestion can be found in the recent work of Farah Godrej. Well aware of the “plurality and elasticity” (2011, 14) of categories such as West and non-West, and cognizant of the “fluidity, internal multiplicity and interpenetration that characterizes them” (ibid, 13), Godrej nevertheless insists that we would do well to preserve this binary distinction because it allows us to keep in the foreground persisting disparities in power (ibid, 14). As she explains, “these categories remain pertinent because they reveal how knowledge production and transmission have continued to reflect and be inflected by disparities in power” (ibid). Similarly, another argument for preserving the West/non-West distinction is that doing so allows us to acknowledge and foreground the colonial context (and the relations of power) out of which these categories emerged:

In the historical-geographical imaginary, the ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ come to us as inter-linked artifacts already produced by various intellectual attempts
to map and chart a passage through a variegated experience of modernity framed through imperial and colonial encounters. We cannot wish these artifacts away in the name of anti-essentialism without effacing the power dynamics of the context that produced them and, what is more, the continued influence of this context upon the present-day world of social scientific investigation (Shilliam 2009, np).

Like Godrej and Shilliam, I am aware of the dangers of essentialism. Like them, I also worry that an excessive preoccupation with avoiding all forms of essentialism runs the risk of displacing, if not altogether erasing, the relations of power that produced these categories. It is for this reason, and in this sense, that I employ these terms here.

Chapter Outline

The introduction and Chapter 2 set the stage and context for the dissertation. The remaining four chapters are organized around four broad thematic concerns that, while not always theorized, are central to the CPT literature: understanding, encounter, dialogue, and power. Chapter 2 situates the project of comparative political theory in relation to the broader historical and political context that has enabled its emergence, as well as in relation to the field of political theory, which it seeks to reform. After elaborating on the project, motivations, and aims of CPT, the chapter highlights some of the unresolved tensions that lie at the core of this project. The central purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to synthesize and systematize the main arguments in support of CPT, as well as to offer an analysis of the existing critiques of the subfield. By pointing to some of CPT’s blind spots, the aim of Chapter 2 is to lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter 3 traces CPT’s intellectual lineage to the project of comparative philosophy and the work of Raimundo Panikkar, J.L. Mehta, and Wilhelm Halbfass. Substantively, this chapter puts forward a critique of comparativism and takes CPT to
task for not looking at the issues associated with the earlier history of comparative philosophy. The main challenge that comparative philosophy faced and sought to overcome, which is also the same challenge confronted by CPT today, can be expressed in the form of the following question: Is it possible to understand the thought and experience of “others,” to have a true dialogue with their traditions, without subsuming them within Western categories and patterns of thought? Deeply committed to the project of cross-cultural understanding, Panikkar, Mehta and Halbfass nevertheless looked upon comparative philosophy with some degree of skepticism and suspicion. This chapter explores the reasons why these three thinkers ultimately viewed comparative philosophy as inadequate to the task of cross-cultural understanding. It suggests that by ignoring the difficulties faced by earlier incarnations of the comparative project, CPT risks repeating comparative philosophy’s failure to broaden Western scholarly horizons and transform the West’s intellectual landscape.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore how CPT scholars have taken up Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism and critically evaluate their proposed “exit” from Orientalism. Chapter 4 shows that partly as a result of their somewhat cursory engagement with Orientalism, and partly as a consequence of Said’s downplaying of the existence of a more sympathetic and non-reductive Orientalist tradition, CPT scholars have retrieved from that work an altogether pejorative understanding of the Orientalist project. Not surprisingly, the result of this move is that CPT scholars end up reproducing Said’s omissions. Just as Said downplayed the existence of an alternative form of Orientalist scholarship, CPT scholars, following Said, are led to obscure that tradition as well. Precisely because they have adopted Said’s characterization of Orientalism, CPT
scholars have not been able to recognize that their project shares certain important similarities with earlier Orientalist scholarship. The chapter argues that framing one of the central concerns of the subfield of CPT as a search for an “exit” from Orientalism is unproductive as it leads us to ask the wrong questions. Instead, I suggest that putting CPT scholars in conversation with one of their most immediate predecessors – namely, J. L. Mehta – can help us reconceive the dilemmas posed by Orientalism in a more productive way.

Chapter 5 takes a closer look at Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and its appropriation by CPT. Specifically, it focuses on Dallmayr and Euben’s reading of Gadamer both of whom find in his approach a powerful alternative to Orientalism. The aim of the chapter is to explore the roots of CPT’s faith that dialogue can provide an antidote to Orientalism and the will to dominate. The chapter begins to answer these questions by foregrounding in some detail Dallmayr and Euben’s engagement with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Where in Chapter 4 I show that comparative political theorists uncritically disavow Orientalism because they understand it only in its pejorative connotation, in this chapter I show that the corollary of the disavowal of Orientalism is the uncritical embrace of dialogue as the obvious antidote to Orientalism’s hegemonic mode of approaching other cultures. Chapter 6 looks at the Human Terrain System (HTS) as a mini case study. It highlights some of the similarities between the respective projects of CPT and HTS, but is careful not to overdraw the parallels between the two. It uses the case of HTS as an example and warning of what can go wrong in cross-cultural encounters. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the argument advanced in this dissertation and points to a way forward.
CHAPTER 2
WHAT IS COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY?: PURPOSE, MOTIVATIONS AND CRITIQUE

Since the late 1990s when comparative political theory (CPT) first called into question the dominance and adequacy of Western frameworks of thinking about politics in a globalized world, comparative political theorists have been pressing the rest of the field to open itself to the study of previously marginalized non-Western perspectives and traditions of thought. For CPT advocates, one of the central contributions of comparative theorizing is that it can help correct political theory's embarrassing parochialism and its Western bias. As a result of some of the early scholarship and advocacy for a turn towards comparative theorizing by scholars like Fred Dallmayr, Roxanne Euben, Farah Godrej, Cary Nederman, Leigh Jenco, Hwa Yol Jung, Anthony Parel, and Andrew March there are now approximately 30 courses in comparative political thought offered at universities in the U.S., Asia, Australia, northern Africa, and Europe (see Ackerly, nd).

Despite the fact that comparative political theory is now accepted as part of the “family of fields of political theorizing” (Jordan and Nederman 2012, 628), there is little agreement, and quite a bit of confusion, about the nature, role, and value-added of CPT within the broader field of political theory and the discipline of political science. This disagreement stems, in part, from a persisting lack of clarity about what CPT actually is. Its purpose, normative motivations, and methodological assumptions remain unclear. Some scholars believe that CPT has the potential of completely transforming, if not altogether “exploding,” the current boundaries of mainstream political thought (see Goto-Jones 2011, 83). Others, like Farah Godrej, argue that despite CPT’s ostensible challenge, mainstream political theory is nowhere close to collapse. She has recently
urged comparative political theorists to assume a “deliberately confrontational and challenging […] posture toward the Westcentric disciplinary turf” (Godrej 2011, 127). Others view CPT as less of a challenge to traditional political theory, but as a fledgling subfield that needs to clarify what makes it distinct from the way political theory is currently practiced in the west (March 2009).

The aim of this chapter is to provide greater clarity about the project of CPT and its repercussions for the broader field of political theory. To this end, the chapter seeks to introduce readers to emerging debates about the need to deparochialize political theory, and to conversations that have been taking place at the margins of the discipline at least for the past decade. The chapter begins by situating the project of CPT both in relation to the broader historical and political context that has enabled its emergence, as well as in relation to the field of political theory that it seeks to reform. As I explained in the Introduction, an exhaustive discussion and review of all the scholarship that falls under the heading of CPT is outside the scope of this chapter. Instead, here I focus primarily on the work of two of the leading practitioners and exponents of CPT – Fred Dallmayr and Roxanne Euben – and those scholars who have followed in their footsteps. After elaborating on the project, motivations, and aims of CPT, this chapter proceeds by pointing to some of the unresolved tensions that lie at the core of this project.

Specifically, I highlight a number of important questions that CPT leaves unaddressed and does not problematize. These include a lack of clarity about the purpose of the subfield; an absence of methodological reflection; a reluctance to specify what CPT is “comparing” and how it proposes to engage with non-Western texts in a
way that does not simply emphasize the similarities between Western and non-Western thought. The central purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to synthesize and systematize the main arguments in support of CPT, as well as to offer an analysis of the existing critiques of the subfield. By pointing to some of CPT’s blind spots, my aim is to lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

**The Case for Comparative Political Theory: Fred Dallmayr’s Challenge to Political Theory**

As a new field of academic inquiry comparative political theory\(^1\) traces its formal beginnings to 1999, the year in which Fred Dallmayr launched and became editor of a new book series titled *Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory* (see Dallmayr 2008, 3).\(^2\) Prior to the founding of this series, Dallmayr had already begun to articulate the central vision of CPT as well as to make the case for the need for comparative political theorizing in some of his earlier work.\(^3\) To be sure, we can find older examples of scholarship undertaken with a view towards decentering the hegemony of modern Western political thought (see Parel and Keith 1992). Nevertheless, it is Dallmayr who is typically considered as the founding figure of this new field.\(^4\) Joining him in the call to promote CPT is Roxanne Euben who, alongside Dallmayr, is another early advocate of the comparative project and whose book, *Enemy*

\(^1\) Sometimes also referred to as comparative political philosophy.

\(^2\) As of this writing, the series has published a total of 19 volumes showcasing work in comparative political theory.

\(^3\) See, for example, Dallmayr (1996, 1997). To a lesser extent, Dallmayr’s interest in issues of cross-cultural communication and understanding can already be seen in his earlier work, *Critical Encounters: Between Philosophy and Politics* (1987), especially Chapter 5.

\(^4\) Dallmayr might resist the title of founder of CPT. Commenting on his involvement with CPT over the years, Dallmayr has written that he is “neither the birthmother nor the only midwife” of this project. While he describes his efforts at promoting CPT as “midwifery”, commentaries on Dallmayr’s work typically portray him as the founder of this subfield.
in the Mirror, is recognized as one of the first full-length works of CPT.\textsuperscript{5} Since some of the most explicit statements in support of CPT have been made by Dallmayr and Euben, in what follows I begin by highlighting their respective accounts of the project and motivations of comparative theorizing.

One of the earliest explicit calls advocating the need for a turn towards comparative theorizing comes from Fred Dallmayr’s introduction to the 1997 special issue of The Review of Politics dedicated to non-Western political thought (see Dallmayr 1997).\textsuperscript{6} As Dallmayr writes (1997, 421), “This Special issue is meant to inaugurate or help launch a field of inquiry which is either nonexistent or at most fledgling and embryonic in contemporary academia: the field of ‘comparative political theory’ or ‘comparative political philosophy’”. These terms, Dallmayr explains, designate a type of inquiry that “reflects upon the status and meaning of political life no longer in a restricted geographical setting but in the global arena” (ibid). In this early essay Dallmayr identifies one central motivating impulse behind the proposal to launch this new academic field. The reason why a turn to comparative theorizing is both appropriate and necessary, Dallmayr argues, is globalization – a process unprecedented in scope and involving “the steadily intensifying interaction among previously (more or less) segregated civilizations or cultural zones” (ibid). Globalization has not only made the encounter with different cultural, philosophical and religious traditions an unavoidable reality, Dallmayr insists that this new condition also imposes on us the need to develop a mode of theorizing that can help us better understand the effects of globalization on human lives. He

\textsuperscript{5} On this point, see Hassan Bashir (2013).

\textsuperscript{6} A revised version of this essay appeared two years later as the introductory chapter to Border Crossings (1999), the first book in the Global Encounters series officially inaugurating the field.
likewise insists that what is needed today is a new, more reflective discourse attentive to deeper existential and moral concerns – in short, a discourse “about the meaning structure of the global village, about proper modes of living and sharing together, or about what Aristotle called the ‘good life’” (Dallmayr 1999, 1). It is in this context that CPT emerges as an alternative that promises to address the implications of these changes for collective life.

If globalization is the historical or external context that has enabled the emergence of CPT, there is also a second justification for the necessity of comparative theorizing, which is internal to the academic world. The need for this new academic subfield stems from a strong dissatisfaction with the way in which political theory is currently practiced in most Western universities. For Dallmayr (1999, 2), this amounts to nothing more than a “rehearsal of the ‘canon’ of Western political thought from Plato to Marx or Nietzsche – with occasional recent concessions to strands of feminism and multiculturalism as found in Western societies.” As he elaborates, “[o]nly rarely are practitioners of political thought willing (and professionally encouraged) to transgress the canon, and thereby the cultural boundaries of North American and Europe, in the direction of genuine comparative investigations” (ibid). Advocates of CPT view this state of affairs as problematic for a number of reasons. As Dallmayr argues (1997, 422), political theory’s insularity and ethnocentrism, paradoxically coupled with its simultaneous claims to universality, not only prove inadequate when it comes to understanding “the puzzling diversity of human experiences”; such an approach is also untenable in a globalized world characterized by ever increasing cross-cultural interactions and exchange of ideas.
These early statements in support of the need for comparative theorizing reveal that the foundational claim of advocates of CPT is that western political theory is parochial and Eurocentric. Viewed in this light, calls for the creation of CPT can be understood both as an invitation and a challenge to the broader field of political theory to begin taking the rest of the world seriously. Hassan Bashir (2008, 19) puts this even more forcefully when he writes that CPT can be regarded as a call to treat non-Western texts and ideas about the political “as real ideas rather than unintelligible oddities or isolated instances of unexpected brilliance originating from cultures which are otherwise deemed politically bankrupt.” Indeed, if political theory is truly concerned with questions about how to best organize collective life, then at the very least, the argument goes, such claims about what constitutes the “good life” should be made after examining all the available alternatives (Godrej 2006, 231). For Dallmayr (1997, 422), this means that Western practitioners of political theory/philosophy “must relinquish the role of universal teacher[s] (buttressed by Western hegemony) and be content with that of fellow student[s] in a cross-cultural learning experience.” The best way to achieve the transformation from teacher to student, Dallmayr suggests, is to adopt the dialogical or hermeneutical approach associated with the work of Gadamer.

While I elaborate on the rationale and implications of adopting Gadamerian hermeneutics for CPT in Chapter 3, at this stage it suffices to say that Dallmayr proposes philosophical hermeneutics as the preferred approach to comparative theorizing in order to counter what he perceives is the dominance of positivist models of social scientific inquiry. Specifically, Dallmayr worries about their tendency to privilege a “spectatorial stance” that arms its practitioners with a global yardstick against which all
non-Western societies are measured and compared (Dallmayr 1997, 421). Rejecting this hegemonic/domineering stance, Dallmayr argues that “the theorist in the global village must shun spectatorial allures and assume the more modest stance of co-participant in the search for truth: by opening heart and mind to the puzzling diversity of human experiences – and also the possibility of jeopardizing cherished preconceptions and beliefs” (ibid, 422).

Although Dallmayr is not explicit about the implications of the turn to comparative theorizing for the broader field of political theory (apart from suggesting that it will require quite a bit of professional retooling), as Andrew March correctly observes, “to call for a subfield labeled comparative political theory is at once to make a statement about its importance and about the moral and intellectual implications of the broader discipline having ignored it for so long” (March 2009, 533; emphasis in original). Indeed, Dallmayr’s remarks strongly suggest that the fledgling field of CPT, if taken seriously, has the potential of posing a serious challenge to the status quo of western political thought. For example, Chris Goto-Jones argues that while it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that political theory should not include non-Western perspectives, finding ways to do so without “completely dismantling the field of political thought and rebuilding it from scratch in a more inclusive way” seems exceedingly complicated (Goto-Jones 2011, 88). Goto-Jones detects an overall anxiety and reluctance on the part of the broader discipline of political thought to embrace CPT. At the same time, he suggests that there is widespread recognition and agreement that things cannot remain as they were before: “the fact that the canon of political thought taught in universities all over the world tends to consist almost exclusively of dead white, “Western” men is
becoming ever more embarrassing and shameful” (ibid).\footnote{William Connolly is another scholar who has recently expressed the same sentiment. He writes, “ten years from now many of us [political theorists] may be ashamed for our failure to engage Chinese, Indian, Arab, and Japanese theory closely” (Connolly 2008, 838).} Thus, the embarrassment over mainstream political theory’s parochialism coexists uneasily with the unstated fear that CPT could potentially transform the entire canon.

Since making the initial call for the creation of CPT in 1997, for the better part of the last fifteen years Dallmayr has continued to urge fellow theorists to “replace or supplement the rehearsal of routinized canons with a turn to global, cross-cultural or ‘comparative’ political theorizing” (Dallmayr 2004: 249). In his subsequent statements about the necessity and importance of this new subfield we can therefore find an expanded and refined conception of some of the motivations and aims of CPT. Whereas Dallmayr had earlier identified globalization as the primary impulse behind the turn to CPT, in his more recent articulations of the project Dallmayr writes that the most obvious (though not exclusive) motivation for the turn to comparative theorizing are the events of September 11. In his first extended essay addressed specifically to political theorists, and in which he offers readers his vision of what CPT is and how it should be done, Dallmayr suggests that the attacks on US soil jolted academics – and political theorists in particular – out of their slumber, prompting them to ask whether political theory “is properly attentive to the ‘burning’ issues of our time” (ibid). If prior to these events it had been possible for Western academia to ignore global interconnections – the long history of contacts, linkages and interdependencies – and the inequalities that structure the relations between different societies and cultures, this was no longer the case. Dallmayr himself suggests as much when he writes: “[t]he fact that the [US] is
inexorably part of the globalizing world necessarily has serious professional and theoretical, as well as political, consequences” (Dallmayr 2004, 250). More than the complex processes of globalization, recent assessments of the emerging subfield point to 9/11 as the strongest rationale for the necessity and urgency of adopting comparative political theory.

Dallmayr points to a number of philosophical sources of inspiration behind the enterprise of CPT. While he acknowledges that Western thought tends to be monological and ethnocentric, within this tradition he isolates the work of a number of twentieth century philosophers who not only share a dissatisfaction with “modern Western egocentrism…and its corollary, Eurocentrism”, but whose thought points us towards a more cross-cultural orientation (ibid). Among these he singles out Heidegger’s elaboration of “planetary thinking” (planetary philosophy), Gadamer’s dialogical hermeneutics, J.L. Mehta’s engagement with, appropriation and reformulation of Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s insights, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s search for a “lateral universal”, and Raimundo Panikkar’s delineation of a “dialogical” or “imparative” philosophy, as well as his proposal for a “diatopical hermeneutics”. Turning to the field of political theory, Dallmayr identifies the work of Anthony Parel, Hwa Yol Jung and Charles Taylor (among others) as some early precursors of CPT.

I will have more to say about CPT’s intellectual predecessors in the next chapter. At this juncture, however, I would like to draw attention to one more rationale Dallmayr invokes for the turn to comparative political theorizing. In presenting the case for CPT, Dallmayr has also made reference to the more personal reasons that motivated him to embrace non-Western thought. In his own case, he dates his turn to comparative
theorizing to 1984, the year in which he was invited by Bhikhu Parekh to attend a conference in India. As Dallmayr recalls,

It was there that I discovered my deplorable “Eurocentrism”. Although I had studied at excellent places in Europe and America, I had never encountered (for instance) the name of Shankara – who occupies a role in the Indian tradition comparable to that of Thomas Aquinas in the West. For the next two decades I traveled to India on a nearly annual basis. I studied Sanskrit in order to be able to savor classical texts. In India I also encountered Buddhism – which later led me to travels in the Far East. And in India I also found a large community of Muslims – an experience which later guided me on trips to the Near East and North Africa (Dallmayr 2008, 1-2).

The above quotation reveals that the impetus behind Dallmayr’s turn to comparative theorizing stems from a sense of personal embarrassment over his lack of familiarity with non-Western thought. Here it is important to recall that William Connolly and Chris Goto-Jones also invoke shame to describe political theory’s reluctance to engage with traditions of thought emanating outside the Euro-American context. Although neither of these three thinkers makes more than a passing reference to shame, all three nevertheless suggest that the embarrassment over having ignored “other” ways of thought for so long could and perhaps will act as a powerful enough stimulus, one that can lead to the restructuring of the broader discipline of political theory. It remains unclear, however, how individuals (let alone an entire field) can be made to feel embarrassed and whether this is a sufficient condition to induce the desired disciplinary changes.

Dallmayr narrates his personal experiences in order to show that “rupturing Eurocentrism is not a quick or instantaneous process” (ibid: 2). Making the journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar not only “involves sustained labor”, it also entails “a possibly painful transformation of thought habits and even ways of life” (ibid). In sharing his own reflections about what is at stake for the theorist who wishes to commit to CPT,
Dallmayr also reveals what he believes are some of the minimum requirements for conducting comparative work. As he explicitly mentions elsewhere, “comparative theorists must necessarily be multilingual and well-trained in translation”. Moreover, he continues, “theorists need to steer a middle course between narrow area specialists and abstract generalists: while the former slight the ‘theoretical’, the latter miss the ‘comparative’ component of comparative political theory” (Dallmayr 2004, 249). While these remarks reveal what is involved in conducting comparative work and suggest that CPT is a hybrid of comparative politics and political theory, at the same time they fail to specify what, apart from its distinctive methodology, distinguishes CPT from area studies or from comparative political science. As I discuss below, recent assessments of the emerging subfield have pointed to this omission as a significant weakness of CPT’s project.

Aside from demanding “quite a bit of professional retooling” of its practitioners, Dallmayr argues that scholars committed to comparative theorizing must also assume the task of being critics of the status quo. They must shoulder “the task of challenging

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8 As Dallmayr argues elsewhere, while CPT complements the subfield of comparative politics it also departs from it in important ways. In particular, Dallmayr is critical of the methods and explanatory models devised and employed by comparative political scientists. He critiques the empirical-descriptive character of their studies, and specifically the strand of comparative work governed by what he refers to as “stylized or formal models of analysis” (Dallmayr 1997, 421; see also Dallmayr 2004). Dallmayr argues that from a CPT perspective what is most dubious about the explanatory models used by practitioners of comparative politics is their “unabashed derivation from key features of modern Western politics: including the structures of the secular nation state with its accent on proceduralism, the separated powers, and public private bifurcations.” Reliance on these methods, Dallmayr claims, allows the comparativist “to assume the stance of global overseer or universal spectator whose task consists basically in assessing the relative proximity or nonproximity of given societies to the established global yardstick” (Dallmayr 1997, 421-422). It is precisely on this issue that CPT scholars part ways with their comparative politics colleagues. As I already indicated in an early part of this chapter, to counter the objectivism of the social sciences, Dallmayr promotes philosophical hermeneutics as the more appropriate approach to doing comparative work because it calls for and enables a dialogical mode of interaction between reader and text, or between self and other. As opposed to positivist models, hermeneutics allows for mutual questioning and contestation.
and resisting the powers that be which are bent on domination, exploitation, and mayhem.” As he continues, those dedicated to the enterprise of CPT “cannot just remain ‘theorists’ in the sense of uninvolved or neutral spectators. They also have to be practitioners or ‘practical’ political thinkers concerned with the relation between theory and praxis, with the translation of insights garnered through inquiry into practical life conduct” (Dallmayr 2009, 22). Dallmayr invokes the Gandhian strategy of satyagraha (commonly translated as ‘truth force’ or ‘soul force’) to describe the way in which CPT practitioners should pursue cross-cultural studies. As he elaborates, comparative theorizing need not preclude critique and contestation, but this engagement must follow the path of ‘agonal’ dialogue, “relying on persuasion and moral or ethical argument.” To engage in comparative study which lacks “the courage of satyagraha,” Dallmayr writes, is akin to engaging in “an empty exercise, an escape into complacency and wishful thinking” (ibid, 23). Although Dallmayr does not employ the term, he seems to suggest that the role of the CPT scholar is akin to that of a parrhesiast – someone who speaks truth to power.  

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9 Dallmayr expounds upon the meaning of satyagraha in his Alternative Visions. Commonly translated as “truth force,” Dallmayr elaborates that “truth” here is not simply an epistemic category but refers to “an existential-ontological engagement on the side of rightness, equity, and brotherhood/sisterhood” (1998, 10). The enactment of truth, Dallmayr continues, requires “a peculiarly ‘unforced’ or nonaggressive type of action and praxis, a mode of conduct thoroughly governed by nonviolence (ahimsa) and by the willingness to suffer rather than to inflict violence and injustice to others” (ibid).

10 Writing about the politics of comparative theory, elsewhere Dallmayr has explained that CPT “sustains…a radically critical perspective on society” (Dallmayr 2004, 254). Hwa Yol Jung, a political theorist whose work offers an early example of comparative theorizing, has similarly argued that philosophy in the globalizing world must be a public philosophy (i.e. concerned with “public issues”), it must be practical, and it must be critical of the existing power structure. It follows that the public philosopher must be a kind of heretic or nonconformist “who dissents from the power of establishment and refuses to accept an established doctrine” (Jung 2009, 24). As he suggests, the role of the public philosopher is to “change the world by first changing the conception of it” (ibid, 25). Like Dallmayr, Hwa Yol Jung also concludes that the ultimate purpose of public philosophy in the age of globalization “is not to fiddle while the world burns.” As he explains, “we must avoid at all costs becoming like the proverbial owl of Minerva that takes its untimely flight only at dusk or a dinosaur in a philosophical Jurassic Park” (ibid, 43).
If Dallmayr seems to want to cast comparative political theory as a parrhesiastic enterprise, Chris Goto-Jones has elsewhere warned that in its current form CPT is “both a means of understanding cultural difference across space, and it is also a means of activism on behalf of [particular] cultural group[s]” (Goto-Jones 2011, 100). Goto-Jones worries that this risks making the CPTist into a “scholar-warrior” – i.e., someone who fights for the voices of marginalized groups “rather than fighting for a revolution in the structures of political knowledge per se” (ibid, 100-101). In different ways, both Dallmayr and Goto-Jones see comparative political theory as an enterprise that promises to radically challenge established conventions. But from Goto-Jones’s perspective, CPT would do better to redirect its activism towards restructuring political knowledge rather than fighting for, or on behalf of, cultural groups.

Dallmayr’s discussion of the role of the CPT scholar opens the way for a consideration of the aims or purpose of CPT. According to Dallmayr (2007: xviii), the central question addressed by political theory/philosophy is this: “how can we live together justly and ethically in a community?” Stemming from the Aristotelian legacy, this question stands in direct opposition to those approaches that view politics as grounded in the friend/enemy distinction (which militarizes politics). Transferred to the global arena, Dallmayr argues that the central question of comparative political theory is “how can we live justly and ethically in a global community?” For Dallmayr, this formulation “opposes the assumption of an international anarchy of nation-states (with its built-in violence) as well as the prognosis of an inevitable clash of civilizations” (ibid). Dallmayr suggests that the most important questions for contemporary political theory
are global in nature. As such, CPT’s effort to include theoretical perspectives from all
corners of the world makes greater sense.

Viewed against this context the project of expanding the canon of political theory
by the inclusion of non-Western voices can be understood as an effort to counter
Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis. In fact, Fred Dallmayr is quite explicit
that “comparative political theory […] is an attempt to prove Huntington’s thesis wrong.
Of course, no one can rule out the possibility of cultural clashes or conflicts; but the
thesis cannot be allowed to become a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’. In lieu of the
Huntingtonian scenario, comparative inquiry places the emphasis on cross-cultural
encounters, mutual learning, and (what has been called) ‘dialogue among civilizations’”
(Dallmayr cited in March 2009, 15).11 Significantly, CPT can also be understood as an
effort to move beyond Orientalism – an effort to uncover possibilities for genuine
dialogical learning that move beyond the limits of assimilation and exclusion (Dallmayr
1995, 134; Euben 2000). This also implies a movement towards understanding the
“other” in a manner that does not reproduce relations of domination.

In response to the prevalent skepticism about the feasibility of cross-cultural
political theorizing, Dallmayr has also discussed the “goods” or ends of CPT. He
believes that “people of good will” are likely to find the turn to comparative theorizing
intuitively appealing and will most likely spontaneously embrace this endeavor.

11 Elsewhere Dallmayr writes, “For many of us who acted as midwives to the emerging endeavor – and
certainly for me – a basic motivation animating the pursuit of comparative political theory was precisely to
prove Huntington wrong. We did not rule out the possibility of cultural clashes or conflicts, but we rejected
the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ looming in his thesis. In lieu of the Huntingtonian scenario we wanted to put
the emphasis on cross-cultural encounters, on mutual learning, on ‘dialogue among civilizations’” (2008,
3). See also Euben, who argues that a focus on “emphasizing shared dilemmas and questions rather
than universal truths enables the project of comparative political theory to avoid the conclusion that
cultures are morally and cognitively incommensurable without imposing supposedly universal categories
and moral rules” (1999, 10).
Common sense, he suggests, dictates that cross-cultural inquiry is to be welcomed and applauded. That said, Dallmayr is aware that “a new mode of inquiry cannot be entirely left to intuition or common sense” (2009, 13). For those who are not immediately convinced about the benefits of CPT, Dallmayr sets out to elaborate on its purpose and value-added. To that end, he argues that there are at least three “goods” resulting from CPT: (1) a pragmatic-utilitarian good; (2) a moral-universal good; (3) and an ethically transformative good (Dallmayr 2009). At an initial level, Dallmayr suggests that cross-cultural inquiry is good for the self or the pursuit of self-interest.

We live in a complex world and have to make our way in the face of many hazards and uncertainties. It is surely advantageous for ourselves, for the pursuit of our concrete self-interest, if we know more about the world and the people with whom we are dealing or have to contend. This is particularly true in our shrinking or globalizing world today – a world exhibiting a great diversity of cultural, philosophical, and religious traditions. As long as we are mired in ignorance or blinded by coarse prejudice, we are likely to go astray or to encounter roadblocks which can frustrate or obstruct the unhampered pursuit of our interests and preferences (Dallmayr 2009, 18).

Dallmayr frames this statement in response to “the real-political evidence of intercultural confrontations and violent conflicts” we are witnessing today (2009, 13). On Shogimen and Nederman’s charitable reading, in the above paragraph Dallmayr is suggesting that by studying other cultures and traditions of political thought we gain useful information, which in turn enables us to participate more meaningfully and effectively in global interactions in our rapidly shrinking world (Shogimen and Nederman 2009, 4). Although this is certainly one way of interpreting Dallmayr’s statement, his argument is based on a number of assumptions, which Shogimen and Nederman fail to problematize. Implicit in Dallmayr’s account is the suggestion that increased inter-cultural contacts, coupled with a lack of familiarity with other cultural traditions, is bound to produce conflict.

Gaining greater understanding about other cultures and ways of thought here emerges
as an antidote to violence. Dallmayr seems to take for granted that a commitment to dialogue and increased knowledge of others will necessarily issue in more sympathetic understanding. But history shows that this has not always been the case. Sometimes understanding can have the opposite effect of actually increasing chauvinism and nationalistic fervor.

To be fair, Dallmayr is well aware that the study of foreign cultures can sometimes be applied towards more nefarious ends like “gaining a strategic advantage or bolstering one’s own sense of superiority”, or even for purposes of domination. To counter this perversion of pragmatic self-interest, Dallmayr argues that comparative political theorizing can be placed in the service of a second end, what he calls the moral-universal good – “the good of finding truly universal principles or yardsticks of human conduct” (Dallmayr 2009,18). In this second sense, the study of other cultures is not completely severed form self-interest; rather, here an attempt is made to “balance…self-interest against the legitimate interests of others”. As Dallmayr continues, here “the ‘other’ is studied not primarily in his or her difference, but with a view toward what is common or shared in humanity” (ibid, 19). The emphasis is on discovering commonalities between self and other, towards the creation of international norms equally binding and applicable to all. As Dallmayr explains, here we enter the domain of the “golden rule”, variations of which can be found across all cultural traditions.

The third good that results from comparative inquiry is an “ethically transformative good”. By studying other cultures, Dallmayr argues, we become more aware of the character and limits of our own culture and traditions. Such awareness, he
continues, “is liable to induce a chastening of the self, of the self’s claim to supremacy or absolute autonomy, and thus to carry with it a lesson of modesty which is likely to have transformative effects” (Dallmayr 2009, 21). For Dallmayr the ultimate benefit of such a transformation is an “enhanced tolerance and genuine recognition of others, including their traditions and aspirations” (ibid). Here we come to appreciate others no longer because of their similarity to us, but as “different other[s] needing to be valued in [their] own right or for [their] own sake” (ibid).

Dallmayr traces a progression of “ethical ascent” that the study of other cultures enables. By engaging in comparative studies the individual self undergoes a profound transformation, moving from a “pragmatic-utilitarian” ego to a “higher self”, one “which is able to forego the ambitions of domination, appropriation, and standardization (or normalization)”. At the same time, the “other” is transformed into “an authentic agent and perhaps a friend”. Here the relationship with the other is appreciated not because of any utility that it can bring to the self, but for its own sake or for the sake of goodness (ibid). It is only at this stage, Dallmayr suggests, that a proper dialogical interaction between self and other can occur. By “dialogue” Dallmayr here means a “genuine [transformative] learning process proceeding through question and answer”.

Interestingly, Dallmayr here seems to be suggesting that a true dialogical interaction can occur only between “friends”. In positing “friendship” as a precondition for dialogue, Dallmayr unwittingly reproduces the same friend/enemy distinction that he earlier criticized and finds problematic.

Moving to the practical-political significance of CPT, Dallmayr concludes his plea to the broader field of political theory by maintaining that the cultivation of comparative theorizing can ultimately contribute to building global peace:

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12 By “dialogue” Dallmayr here means a “genuine [transformative] learning process proceeding through question and answer”.

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Cultivation of this field...is an urgent demand in contemporary academic and intellectual discourse. Beyond purely academic concerns fostering this field has practical-political significance: theorizing in a comparative or better ‘imparative’ vein may contribute to deeper cross-cultural understanding and hence to peace in the global village (Dallmayr 1997, 427).

As these comments suggest, Dallmayr charges CPT with the ambitious task of creating a more just and equitable world.

Rearticulating the Task of the Political Theorist: Roxanne Euben’s Traveling Theorists

Like Dallmayr before her, Roxanne Euben likewise locates the motivation and need for comparative theorizing in a tension within Western political theory itself. On the one hand, Euben sees an aspiration on the part of political theorists “to engage questions about the nature and value of politics, that, if not universal, are at least pressing to a broad range of peoples and cultures.” On the other hand, she suggests that this desire coexists uneasily with “a political theory canon almost exclusively devoted to Western texts” (Euben 1999, xi). Rather than see this as a debilitating condition Euben uses this tension to remind political theorists that “theory once was and should again be inherently comparative” (ibid, 158). Euben's understanding of political theory as an inherently comparative enterprise is central to her conception of the project of CPT. As she explains,

[T]he project of comparative political theory introduces non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that ‘political theory’ is about human and not merely Western dilemmas. It is perhaps best understood as a hybrid of the contemporary disciplines of political theory and comparative politics, for it entails the attempt to ask questions about the nature and value of politics in a variety of cultural and historical contexts (Euben 1999, 9).

Euben’s description of CPT rests on an understanding of political theory as “defined by certain questions rather than particular answers: What is the good life? What is the
nature of legitimate authority? Of justice? What is the right relationship of individual to society?” (ibid). For Euben, political theory is ultimately concerned with investigating problems of coexistence. Arguing against the assumption that only the West has produced political theory, Euben seeks to dispel the erroneous notion that political theory is coterminous with Western civilization (ibid, 10). In this context, comparative political theory emerges both as a methodology and an argument for “the possibility that there [exists] humanly significant knowledge outside the confines of the Western canon” (ibid; also see Euben 2002, 25).

As described above, comparative political theory builds on the premise that despite moral and political disagreements, different cultures are not “morally and cognitively incommensurable, but exist in conversation with one another” (Euben 1999, 10). Such intercultural conversations are made possible, Euben argues, due to the “syncretism that is a hallmark of a world marked by extensive Western cultural influence: in a postcolonial world increasingly marked by neocolonial globalization, questions we take to be ours have ceased to be so exclusively (if in fact they ever were) because they have come to frame the sensibilities of non-Westerners as well” (ibid). Euben is keen to emphasize that the possibility of a conversation across cultures “is not premised upon the existence of universal or perennial questions that arise by virtue of being human” (ibid). In fact, interrogating the very existence of universal truths is a central task of CPT. Rather than focusing on discovering universal truths, CPT places emphasis on uncovering shared dilemmas. This approach, according to Euben, enables CPT to avoid the conclusion that cultures are incommensurable “without imposing supposedly universal categories and moral rules” (ibid). In sum, then, Euben suggests
that it is against the privileging of Western experience in investigations about the nature of the good life and political order – against the parochialism and the presumption of universality on the part of Western political thought – that CPT finds its primary orientation.

Euben argues that we should understand the turn to comparative theorizing not as a newfound burden imposed on us by our changed circumstances in the 21st century, but rather as something that has always been “part of the very nature of healthy political reflection” (White 2002, 9). Tracing the etymology of the English word theory to the Greek practice of theôria, Euben reminds fellow theorists that in one of its early uses “theory” connoted “the act of observing, seeing, witnessing” (1999, 10). A theorist (theôros) was someone who traveled outside the confines of the polis to attend (and learn from) the religious festivals of other Greek cities.13 Over time “theory” and the practices of travel and observation it was linked to (i.e., travel to and observation of different lands, customs, institution, and people) came to be associated more explicitly with the “systematic investigation and attainment of knowledge” (Euben 2006, 22).

Importantly, such journeys to distant lands did not only produce knowledge of foreign “others”. While exposure to other ways of life and the knowledge it engendered was crucial for an understanding of the world, it was also considered necessary for the attainment of political wisdom and political excellence. But such exposures to the foreign simultaneously carry great risks for both the traveler and his city. After all, travel can engender a more critical stance towards one’s own culture, leading one to question the “naturalness” of one’s perspective. What is more, the prospect of “going native” is

13 Carrying multiple meanings, a theôros also referred to “a spectator, a state delegate to a festival in another city, and someone who travels to consult an oracle” (Euben 2006, 21).
never far behind. We might be tempted by the “foreign” ways of life and begin to appreciate another culture as an alternative to our own. The knowledge travelers bring home is therefore considered to be both salutary and corrupting. Referencing Plato’s *Laws*, Euben writes that in antiquity travelers, upon their homecoming, had to be carefully screened for traces of any corrupting influence. If it was shown that the *theôros* had been contaminated by his travels, he could be forcibly removed from the city by isolation or even death (Euben 2006, 22).

Recovering this older notion of *theôria* that exposes the link between the double-edged nature of travel and the attainment of knowledge leads to a different conceptualization of theory. On Euben’s account, theorizing is best understood as “a practice intimately connected to the comparative insights firsthand observation often provides.” Rather than the opposite of the empirical and the everyday, Euben argues, theory arises from and informs concrete practices and experiences (Euben 2006, 23). Rather than a practice characterized by detachment from the world, theory (understood as travel in search of knowledge) is very much “movement in and though the world” (ibid). Highlighting theory’s embeddedness in the world is in part meant to challenge arguments that defend detachment and insularity as a better approach to studying other cultures and ways of life. In particular, Euben looks to British philosopher James Mill’s monumental history of India, which he wrote without ever having set foot in the country. As Mill famously said, “a man who is duly qualified may obtain more knowledge of India in one year in his closet in England, than he could obtain during the course of the longest life, by the use of his eyes and ears in India” (Mill quoted in Euben 2006, 19).
CPT as envisioned by Euben, therefore, can be understood as an invitation to political theorists to adopt the stance of a traveler. Euben is well aware of some of the less salutary consequences of travel. If travel and firsthand experience can occasion comparisons that in turn give rise to critical, and potentially transformative, reflections on the familiar and the unfamiliar, travel is also linked to myopia and a narrowness of vision. As Euben suggests (2006, 195), the emphasis on the practice of *autopsy*, of “seeing with one’s own eyes”, can foreclose the reflective knowledge made possible by cognitive/imaginative travel. Travel can often have the opposite effect of engendering a sense of critical self-reflection and learning. History is littered with examples of travelers who not only learned next to nothing in their travels, but whose encounters with difference only served to confirm their sense of civilizational superiority.\(^{14}\)

Acknowledging the double-edged nature of travel, Euben ultimately seeks to highlight the dislocating and transformative character of the encounter with difference.

In their respective descriptions of the aims and purposes of CPT, both Dallmayr and Euben seek to highlight the transformative nature of the cross-cultural encounter. In different ways both acknowledge that, although such encounters can be painful, they are ultimately beneficial to those who open themselves to the experience. At the background of Euben and Dallmayr’s reflections on the nature, purpose and scope of CPT lies an engagement, at times only implicit, with the influential, if controversial, work of Edward Said.\(^{15}\) In one of his first books to lay the groundwork for CPT, Dallmayr quite

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\(^{14}\) Thinkers like Greenblatt (1992) and Todorov (1999) have shown how travel can also resist and deny the encounter with difference.

\(^{15}\) One of Dallmayr’s first forays into comparative political theory is his book, *Beyond Orientalism*. Apart from the title, which bears the name of Said’s own influential book, in this text Dallmayr is very explicit about the fact that much of his analysis is indebted to the work of Said. Similarly, in her books *Enemy in
explicitly suggests that comparative inquiry must take into account Said’s work on Orientalism.

Although Dallmayr argues that Orientalism, understood as “the collusion of scholarship with the imperatives of colonial domination”, is no longer prevalent today, he nevertheless points out that we must not be too quick in celebrating its passing:

Clearly, the demise of Orientalism cannot be cause for lament. Still, even while welcoming new departures, one may plausibly be concerned about the manner of the demise, that is, the way in which the exit from Orientalism is sought and performed. Is it really possible to move briskly from Eurocentrism to anti-Eurocentrism? Is it sensible to equate traditional learning – however flawed – simply with colonial oppression?... In our globalizing context, is there not still room and need for cross-cultural understanding – beyond the confines of Eurocentrism and logocentrism? And does such understanding not involve or presuppose a patient learning process, a sustained effort of reciprocal interrogation, which, in turn, can hardly disdain some of the resources (philological, historical, anthropological) of traditional scholarship? (Dallmayr 1996, 116)

Dallmayr points to a number of Western and non-Western thinkers – including W.C. Smith, J.L. Mehta, Raimundo Panikkar, and Wilhelm Halbfass – who he believes have laid the groundwork for the type of post-Orientalist scholarship towards which CPT seeks to move the entire field of political theory. While Dallmayr believes that Orientalism is a thing of the past, other scholars have argued that in the age of the global “war on terror” Orientalism is back again, “revivified and hideously emboldened” (Gregory 2004, 18). Roxanne Euben has similarly suggested that in the years since the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism, questions about how and if knowledge beyond Orientalism is possible have assumed greater urgency (Euben 2000). Said’s book pondered the close connection between academic knowledge and colonial power, and
called into question “not only the possibility of non-political scholarship but also the advisability of too close a relationship between the scholar and the state” (Said 2003, 326).

If Said’s Orientalism is not without its theoretical limitations, it is equally important to recognize the continuing power and relevance of his insights in light of the recent global developments I outlined in the dissertation’s introduction. Said is predominantly read as (and criticized for) granting too much power to the “West” – thereby depriving the “Orient” of any agency by failing to offer an account of political resistance. In addition, Said’s critique is often associated with the impossibility of disinterested and non-totalizing modes of knowing and knowledge production. That said, this is also the place to note that Said recognized that “[p]erhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from […] a non-repressive and non-manipulative, perspective” (Said 2003, 24).

In light of this, advocates of comparative political theory seem especially well suited to undertake the project Said left unfinished. This is because CPT, broadly understood, seeks to disrupt what have been called “hegemonic and imperialistic modes of theorizing” in which “I observe myself and others like me culturally and in other ways and use that account to give an account of you. In doing this I remake you in my own image” (quoted in Euben 2000, 401). In lieu of such Orientalist theorizing which enacts a hierarchy of self-other relations, comparative political theorists propose an alternative approach that replaces monologue (understood as the privileging of Western thought and experience, i.e., as the West speaking on behalf of humanity) with
dialogue. For example, Fred Dallmayr advocates “multicultural globalism” or a kind of global thinking as an alternative to Orientalism. As Hwa Yol Jung notes (2001, 339), Dallmayr’s approach is not simply an “exit” from Orientalism “but also opens up an alternative entrance that differs from Samuel Huntington’s theory of the ‘clash of civilizations’”.

Of course, the project of including non-Western perspectives and voices in the Western academy is not unique to comparative political theory. Similar attempts to expand the curriculum have already been made by feminist studies, comparative literature and other related fields. A number of shared concerns emerge as common to all these efforts, including the challenge of how to read, interpret, and write about “alien” or non-Western texts. The challenges posed by this problem are perhaps best articulated by Robert Bernasconi. Writing in the context of Western philosophy’s engagement with African philosophy, Bernasconi notes that “Western philosophy traps African philosophy in a double bind: either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt” (Bernasconi 1997, 188). With regards to the growing interest in Third World women’s texts, Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj likewise observe that the gesture of inclusion of Third World women’s voices in the Western Academy is not an innocent, apolitical act. Indeed, they find that “it often functions to contain Third World women’s voices within a predefined space” that both preempts and determines “what [third world women] could say and whether they would be heard when they spoke” (Amireh and Majaj 2000, 1).
As a relatively new subfield, comparative political theory faces many of the same challenges and ethical dilemmas engendered by the encounter with difference (e.g., the encounter with different theories, modes of thought, perspectives, etc.). Fred Dallmayr correctly notes that “cross-cultural encounters today are deeply overshadowed by political and economic asymmetries shaping the respective status of West and non-West, of Northern and Southern hemispheres, and of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ societies. Commitment to dialogue and hermeneutical interrogation cannot cancel awareness of these asymmetries” (Dallmayr 1996, xvii). And yet Dallmayr, and comparative political theorists in general, remain vague about the ways in which CPT will negotiate the challenges attending the expansion of the “western canon” of political theory.

While there is no definitive consensus about the larger benefits of CPT to the broader field of political theory, from the perspective of CPT’s advocates comparative theorizing – understood as a response to Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis as well as an effort to move scholarship beyond Orientalism – is portrayed as a positive development that not only promises to enrich the field of political theory, but also foreshadows the future direction of the discipline. But if CPT can be seen as a dissenting voice within mainstream political theory that attempts to expand its purview and convert its practitioners, with Ashis Nandy we may recall that any attempt at dissent must begin with two realizations. First, it is necessary to keep in mind that “yesterday’s dissent is often today’s establishment and, unless resisted, becomes tomorrow’s terror” (Nandy 2004, 13). Second, Nandy also points out that dissent itself has been co-opted by the status quo, such that “even when in opposition…[today’s] dissent remains
predictable and controlled” (2009: xii). Nandy refers to this type of dissent as “official” or managed dissent – a type of dissent that never transgresses the bounds of what are considered acceptable challenges to the status quo. Nandy’s insights on the politics of dissent allow us to view CPT as occupying an even more ambiguous position – its project is both a promise and a threat.

**Critiques of Comparative Political Theory**

Having elaborated on the project, motivations and aims of CPT in the preceding sections of this chapter, in this section I seek to document some of the main critiques that have been directed at the emerging subfield as well as to critically assess the alternatives prescribed by these critiques. Specifically, I highlight six areas that continue to generate much debate. These include a lack of clarity about the purpose of comparative theorizing; an absence of methodological reflection; a reluctance to specify what CPT is “comparing” and how it proposes to engage with non-Western texts in a way that does not simply emphasize the similarities between Western and non-Western thought.

**Lack of Clarity About the Purpose of Comparative Theorizing**

Notwithstanding the steady increase in the visibility of CPT in recent years, debates about the nature and status of CPT within the broader field of political theory continue to occur at the margins of the discipline. For the most part, there is widespread recognition that the turn towards comparative theorizing is a welcome development in the discipline. And yet there is little agreement as to the nature and scope of the benefits (or value-added) of CPT. In this regard, one of the first and most prevalent criticism addressed to the emerging subfield of CPT is that the main impetus behind existing calls for the need for comparative theorizing remains vague or implicit (see
March 2009, 565). In the words of Farah Godrej, calls for the creation of a ‘comparative political theory’ lack clarity on a number of important issues. As Godrej (2006, 6) contends, CPT is currently practiced with little or “no sense of what the purpose of such theorizing might be.” While it is commonly agreed that Western political thought can no longer afford to ignore the rest of the world, Godrej correctly observes that “it is not enough for us to say that ‘political theory shouldn’t just be about Western texts’”. There needs to be greater clarity and “a clearer understanding of the precise ways in which non-Western texts can enrich the discipline” (Godrej 2006, 8).

In an attempt to fill this gap and provide a greater sense of coherence to CPT, Godrej has proposed that the encounter with non-Western texts can serve at least four interrelated purposes. First, she suggests that comparative theorizing can lead to a “recognition of the sheer diversity of the ways in which human life and political experience are theorized in different times and places” (Godrej 2006, 14). Second, like Dallmayr, Godrej similarly argues that CPT allows us to better understand the societies with which we come into contact and with which we engage politically, “thereby improving modes of political engagement” (ibid). Third, not only do such encounters allow us to understand others better, they also lead to an enhanced self-understanding enabling us “to understand better our own political life, as well as to think imaginatively about the solutions to our own dilemmas” (ibid). Lastly, Godrej argues that the ultimate purpose of CPT “is to allow us to re-imagine our own world, by enabling us to see through different lenses, and causing us to question whether the solutions we have ‘settled’ on are indeed the best ones” (ibid). In short, Godrej suggests that the main
value and purpose of engaging in comparative inquiry is that it enables critical self-reflection, which can in turn lead us to reevaluate and re-imagine our political life.

In an excellent article, and one of the first to critically assess recent calls for the creation of comparative political theory, Andrew March (2009, 538) argues that the purpose and justifications of CPT as articulated by its different practitioners coalesce around five main themes: the “epistemic,” the “global-democratic,” the “critical-transformative,” the “explanatory-interpretive,” and the “rehabilitative.” As March (ibid, 539) argues, one of the first justifications for the need for CPT is an epistemic one. The argument is that political theory cannot make claims to its universality without at the same time including non-Western perspectives in its purview (ibid). Pointing to the work of Dallmayr and Euben, March writes that for these scholars it is not so much the “civilizational identity of a value or concept which is central, but the epistemic value in encountering the alien” (ibid). The main argument advanced here is that we may have something to learn from non-Western theorists we have arbitrarily excluded from our canon. This is why, as March writes, some CPT scholars “make the effort to show that we are depriving ourselves of substantive ethical knowledge about political life” by excluding non-Western writers and perspectives (ibid).

As I discussed in the previous section, in different ways both Euben and Dallmayr point to globalization as an important factor that dictates the need for comparative theorizing. March labels this the “global-democratic” justification. The case for CPT is here framed in the form of a question: “if the most important questions of contemporary political philosophy are themselves of a global nature, how could a ‘planetary philosophy’ (as Dallmayr calls it) proceed except by including a planet’s worth
of theoretical perspectives?” (March 2009, 540). In the words of another scholar, this argument for the necessity and significance of CPT places emphasis on the “importance of taking seriously the increasing contact between cultures as a result of globalization” (Godrej 2011, 7).

Alongside this argument for CPT is a related one that critiques the “need for a better universalism” implicit in the global-democratic arguments. According to this third justification, most explicitly articulate in the work of Euben, “extending Western frames and concepts to non-Western contexts in not just mistaken but it is an act of hegemony and domination that ought to be counteracted by exploring the ways in which non-Western thinkers discuss political questions” (March 2009, 541). As March writes, the third argument advanced in support of the need for CPT draws on the critical-transformative motivation theorized by postcolonial studies (ibid). Stated differently, the critical-transformative argument for comparative theorizing emerges from the “postcolonial imperative to resuscitate forms of knowledge dismissed by Orientalist modes of domination” (Godrej 2011, 7).

A fourth motivation for comparative theorizing (the explanatory-interpretive) is that “studying non-Western perspectives illuminates common problems at the intersection of political theory and comparative politics” (March 2009, 541). That is to say, some scholars make the case for CPT by emphasizing “the purely explanatory power of understanding other societies for social science and policy relevance” (Godrej 2011, 7). Lastly, March elaborates on what he calls the “rehabilitative” justification for CPT. By this he refers to those arguments which make the case for comparative theorizing by pointing to the possible similarities or equivalences between Western and
non-Western thinkers. For example, some work in comparative political theory “seeks to
demystify the divide between contemporary Western standards and the views or
practices of a non-Western tradition. The underlying message is that a non-Western
thinker, religion, culture, or tradition has been unfairly branded as more illiberal,
irrational, monolithic, alien, or antidemocratic than is really the case” (March 2009, 542).
The point here, as March argues, is not to justify a given norm or practice by showing
that it can be affirmed by multiple traditions, but rather to rehabilitate a non-Western
tradition by showing that is less alien or hostile than its opponents charge (ibid). That is,
the implicit goal is to render the unfamiliar less strange and therefore a source of less
anxiety.

The Problem of Emphasizing Similarities as Opposed to Differences

The practice and focus in the CPT literature on establishing parallels between
Western and non-Western traditions of political thought is the source of another major
critique leveled at CPT. Here it is important to recall that in one of the earliest
articulations of the project of CPT, Anthony Parel and Ronald Keith (1992, 7) identified
comparative political philosophy with “the study of substantive equivalence or
parallelism in the development of different traditions of political philosophy.” As Parel
elaborates, it is precisely “the presence of such ‘equivalences’ that makes the
comparative study of political philosophy possible” (ibid, 12). Given this starting
premise, for Parel, such a study “is nothing other than the process, first, of identifying
the ‘equivalences’, and second, of understanding their significance. Such
‘equivalences’, if and when they are found, would both deepen one’s understanding of
one’s own tradition and engender understanding and respect for the traditions of others”
(ibid).
For CPT scholars, the upshot of emphasizing commonalities rather than differences is that such an approach to cross-cultural inquiry avoids the conclusion that cultures are morally and cognitively incommensurable. As Euben suggests, the focus on uncovering similarities can likewise draw attention to the long history of connections between the West and non-Western cultures, as well as establish the possibility and conditions for a conversation across cultures (Euben 1999, 10). However, as Andrew March rightly points out, comparative theorizing sometimes consists in nothing more than pointing to similarities or parallels across cultures. Absent from many such studies is a clear statement about what is to be gained and learned by pointing to these equivalences. Indeed, as March (2009, 544) writes, “the precise impetus behind, and the moral or epistemic stakes involved in, observing theses similarities is vague or undertheorized.” For March, the problem of structuring comparative theorizing by focusing on establishing similarities is problematic because most scholars fail to clarify “why we should care that certain concepts or claims seem to have analogues or equivalences across space and time” (ibid). March concludes “that the main purpose of drawing these comparisons is merely appreciative or rehabilitative in the sense of combating the notions that all good ideas have come from Western writers and that non-Western traditions are characterized essentially by their least sophisticated manifestations” (ibid).

Farah Godrej has also elaborated on the problem of establishing parallelisms or equivalences across different traditions of political thought. For Godrej (2011, 29-30), the main concern is that an absence of focus on what makes non-Western ideas different and distinct acts to “reinforce, rather than challenge, the presumption that other
traditions have addressed the same kinds of questions that Western political theory has aimed to address (albeit in different ways)." Importantly, Godrej continues, such analyses also implicitly suggest that “what is most valuable about examining these resources is precisely their ability to replicate the concerns and preoccupations of West-centric theorizing” (ibid, 30). As Godrej points out, many scholars do not draw attention to the concepts and frameworks that motivate the non-Western traditions of thought they choose to study. Furthermore, they do not explain or clarify how these are different from the frameworks organizing Western scholarship (ibid, 30, 32).

What is Comparative Political Theory “Comparing”?

Godrej’s critique gets to the heart of another related and equally important omission in the CPT literature. As a number of scholars sympathetic to the enterprise of CPT have pointed out, there is at present very little reflection about how cross-cultural theorists (CPTers) identify their “units” of analysis. That is to say, there is little discussion about “which texts, ideas or modes of scholarship bear investigation in traditions that are relatively unfamiliar to us, and what criteria [might be used] to identity them” (Godrej 2011, 26). For his part, Chris Goto-Jones frames this problem as a series of questions that CPT has so far neglected to address. Aside from pointing to CPT’s difficulty in identifying “units or even categories appropriate for comparison” (Goto-Jones 2011, 104), he draws attention to the following questions that need clarification: For example, when one wishes to engage in comparative or cross-cultural theorizing, where and how does one find comparable entities? Who might count as a political thinker and what counts as political theory? What constitutes a comparable political idea? What kinds of sources should one be looking at – texts, philosophical treatises, poetry, art, music, graphics, etc., (Goto-Jones 2011, 106-107)?
As Farah Godrej adds, CPT scholarship needs to be more explicit about the meaning of the word “political” at work here (2006, 91). Moreover, CPT needs to settle the question of whether political inquiry everywhere does or does not have the same shape as our own. “The failure to make explicit how other frameworks, categories and motivating inquiries are often different from the ones organizing West-centric scholarship”, Godrej argues, “leaves much of CPT vulnerable to…a lack of awareness” (2011, 27). For Godrej, reflecting upon these questions and the standards for inclusion of non-Western texts is a task that CPT cannot afford to ignore. Not only would answers to these questions provide the enterprise of CPT with a much needed sense of coherence, as Godrej contends devising such criteria would allow scholars to better “articulate precisely what it is about particular non-Western texts that we find worth investigating” (2006, 111).

**Can and Should Comparative Political Theory Critique Non-Western Thought?**

Andrew March extends this critique further. More specifically, his criticism centers on the use of the term “comparative” as a description of the work that falls under the banner of CPT. March argues that the way in which CPT is currently practiced is at odds with what he believes a properly conceived comparative project should look like. He contends that in its current form, CPT does not go beyond the type of comparisons that most political theory makes as a matter of course. Rather than reflect on methods, problems, or specific questions, March contends that CPT scholars currently focus exclusively on foregrounding non-Western political thought uncritically. For March (2009, 537), this amounts to nothing more than a “zoological cataloguing of diversity.” While there is nothing objectionable about this type of political theory, the problem here is that many CPT scholars stop short of critically engaging with the non-Western texts
and thinkers they interpret. To get a better sense of March’s specific critique of much of the current CPT literature, it is worthwhile to quote him at length:

It is not clear whether CPT calls for us to read non-Western authors and examine non-Western views the way we are entitled to read and study Western ones (critically, unsentimentally, and even disrespectfully if we so wish), or whether their ‘alien’ status requires that we treat them differently – with both more, and thus less, respect. It is often asserted that the fact of disagreement (with liberalism or some other so-called Western value) emerging from a non-Western text is sufficient warrant for writing on this text, but rarely is that source given the same first-order critical treatment as a Western one. Non-Western texts are thus asserted to be in dialogue with us but also assumed to have to be treated in their own terms. There is a hint that we may have something to learn from this or that writer being discussed, but often the claim goes no further than that he or she is merely evidence of the existence of a certain debate. Thus, a great irony of the comparative political theory discourse is that non-Western texts are often not given enough weight in the sense of not being seen as eligible for the same critical rejection as a Western one would (for doing so might be regarded as a reassertion of the priority and hegemony of Western concepts. However, they are also often given too much weight in the sense of being called on to represent a certain civilization’s, culture’s, or religion’s difference from (and/or similarity with) so-called Western values (March 2009, 545-546).

CPT’s failure to critically engage with and evaluate non-Western political theory not only renders cross-cultural theorists’ work less meaningful and interesting, March argues that it is also less likely to convince other political theorists of the need for the creation of separate subfield dedicated to the encounter with non-Western texts. What is more, the desire to treat non-Western theory on its own terms not only renders the comparative project untenable, this desire also coexists uneasily with claims that assert the similarity between Western and non-Western traditions of thought. March argues, rightly I believe, that CPT needs to reflect upon and offer more compelling reasons for the imperative of engaging with non-Western traditions of thought. As he points out, a

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16 Of course, there are some notable exceptions here. In particular, March (2009) cites the work of Farah Godrej, Leigh Jenco, and Ananta Kumar Giri as exceptions to this trend.
reader of work in CPT can easily walk away with “the vague sense that it is simply good or virtuous to know more about the world and that studying non-Western traditions in particular is an act of recognition” (March 2009, 549-550). But for March the problem is that while this may constitute an honorable civic act, it is not a theoretical or philosophical one (2009, 550). It is not clear whether CPT’s penchant for uncritical cataloguing of diversity is merely meant to “deflect the crudest and most objectionable forms of Western triumphalism,” or whether something more is at stake.

**How is Comparative Political Theory Different from Area and Cultural Studies?**

March’s critique partially overlaps with and is extended by the recent work of Chris Goto-Jones. Like March, Goto-Jones suggests that if it is really the case that there are political ideas emanating outside of Euro-America that are vastly different from those inside this region, then CPT needs to make it very clear “what it is about those ideas that makes them so different?” The answer to this question cannot simply be that what makes these ideas distinct, and therefore worthy of consideration, is their origin outside the Euro-American sphere (Goto-Jones 2011, 89). Goto-Jones is critical of the way in which most work in CPT privileges spatial and socio-cultural categories in describing what its project is about. For example, Farah Godrej (2006, 2) defines the project of CPT as engaged in “introducing non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together.” While it is not exactly clear what comparative political theory is “comparing,” there is an implicit understanding that to

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17 In a similar vein Andrew March argues that CPT needs to be able to answer the following question: “what makes a text, thinker, or tradition ‘alien’, thus justifying treating an instance of moral disagreement as a problem for comparative political theory?” Like Goto-Jones, March also suggests that the answer to this question “cannot just be the cultural or geographical background of the writer” (March 2009, 552).
conduct properly comparative work one must engage with thinkers and traditions of thought originating outside the West. As Goto-Jones (2011, 90, 94) argues, an emphasis on space and geographical location of origin lies at the root of CPT’s difficulties and “risks derailing both the intellectual and ethical project of CPT.”

The repeated invocation of spatial categories such as “West” and a negatively defined “non-West” works to create and maintain the impression that there is a radical distance and difference between the two. Not only that, but it also pulls the enterprise of CPT into the realms of cultural and area studies, thus begging the question of how exactly comparative theorizing differs from the two. For Goto-Jones, this is an important distinction to be made especially considering the fact that area studies was institutionalized in the U.S. after WWII, in large part to supply information on potential enemies of the United States. Critics charge that the manner in which area studies and comparative politics scholars go about gaining knowledge of “others” ends up reducing the “non-Western into objects of study for the so-called West, denying the vast majority of the globe its subjectivity and positing it as only a source of data (for the West to analyze in its own terms) and not [as a source] of innovation and theory” (Goto-Jones 2011, 91).

Given that CPT traces its origins to disciplines like comparative politics, anthropology, and area studies (among others) it is important that its practitioners clarify how the subfield differs from these disciplines (and why it is not simply a genus of area studies) and how it proposes to overcome some of their shortcomings and limitations.

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18 The paradox here is that, in the words of Harry Harootunian, “while we go from a place marked as the West to study the East, we – as Westerners – conspire to keep the two sectors of the globe from encountering each other” (Harootunian 2002, Kindle location 343).
Indeed, it is not enough to assert that CPT opposes Western triumphalism or hegemonic modes of theorizing. In itself, this does not guarantee freedom from the epistemic violence CPT wishes to avoid inflicting. As I briefly discussed in an earlier section of this chapter CPT’s rejection of positivism and its turn to interpretivism (read Gadamerian hermeneutics) is often portrayed as an antidote both to real and epistemic violence. However, as we have already seen, critics charge that one consequence of this approach is that it forecloses the possibility of critical engagement with the “other.”

Goto-Jones (2011, 100) proposes one possible solution to this dilemma. He suggests that the key to overcoming some of these problems “might be to deprivilege spatial and regional appellations altogether rather than emphasizing them.” Rather than define itself as the study of non-Western traditions of thought, thus emphasizing and reinscribing the distinction between the West and the Rest, Goto-Jones argues that CPT should be about “understanding across philosophical and political discontinuities” – i.e., discontinuities “in our structures of thinking about politics [which] provoke metaphysical and cosmological issues” (ibid, 89). But for this to occur CPT needs to engage in sustained reflection about the method and practice of “comparison,” something it has thus far neglected. If CPT is understood as political thought that is engaged in the comparison of discontinuities rather than ideas emanating from different geocultural blocs, then this would “despatialize the practice and re-center the concern on political ideas per se rather than on place” (ibid, 117). Importantly, this would mean that not all non-European thought would fall into this category and that some European thought would actually be a good candidate for comparative inquiry. Yet, in his desire to free CPT from the emphasis on space and place, Goto-Jones neglects to consider
those perspectives that have grappled with the question of how thought relates to place. I have in mind here thinkers such as Walter Mignolo and Dipesh Chakrabarty, both of whom stress the importance of locality (or the “locus of enunciation”) from which thinking emerges, and both of whom grapple with the relation of the local to universal claims/ideas which, because they refuse to acknowledge their location, seem to emerge from “nowhere” or “everywhere.”

Absence of Methodological Reflection

While I will return to the issue of comparability in the following section, here I would like to draw attention to one final critique that CPT must address. Whereas Goto-Jones (2011, 101) fantasizes about “a fictional textbook on the history of political thought that deliberately eschews all references to place or origination of the ideas it discusses,” Farah Godrej very much emphasizes the locus of origination of political ideas. In a certain sense, we may understand Godrej’s and Goto-Jones’ respective positions as different solutions to the same problem, namely, the problem of how to conduct comparative inquiry. Godrej’s specific critique of CPT is that the emerging subfield lacks methodological reflection. This is a problem because, as she argues, “methodological questions about the practice of comparative political theory are linked to the re-envisioning of political theory as a more cosmopolitan endeavor” (Godrej 2011, 4). Godrej is among only a handful of scholars who advocates fieldwork and actual physical dislocation as a necessary component of any sophisticated comparative inquiry. To better understand the foreign texts, concepts and ideas one is working with, Godrej advocates what she calls an “existential understanding” as the most

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19 Leigh Jenco (2007) is another scholar who advocates fieldwork and deep immersion into a foreign culture as a means of gaining better understanding of a text.
appropriate method to conduct comparative political theory. Such an approach requires complete immersion into the culture and traditions one is studying, which means learning to live by the very ideas expressed in a text (Godrej 2011, 54). I discuss Godrej’s approach in more detail chapter 4. Here it suffices to say that for Godrej it is the “visceral and physical exposure to unfamiliarity” (ibid: 70) engender by travel and fieldwork that promises to enhance comparative theorizing.

Conclusion

Taken together, all the (friendly) critiques and statements in support of CPT coalesce, in different ways, around one (sometimes unspoken) desire: that of having one’s (the West’s) ideas and perspective disrupted and challenged by the unfamiliar, the foreign, the strange. It is frequently asserted that such disruptions, though painful, are ultimately beneficial as they are likely to produce profound transformations of self. As Dallmayr suggests, encounters with the unfamiliar can lead to greater tolerance, a chastening of self, and the abandoning of the will to dominate. Dallmayr and others have also suggested that the ultimate purpose of the estrangement generated by the encounter with and study of other cultures is to de-center the hegemony of the West. Indeed, there is a strong sense in which immersion in otherness is here presented as an obvious antidote to Eurocentrism and Western triumphalism. That said, it is not always clear what the impact and purpose of such disruptions should be: To engender critical self-reflection (causing us to cast a critical eye on our political world and institutions)? To critique the status quo? If so, then CPT needs to be more explicit about the larger purpose of such disruptions.

In different ways, the critiques of CPT discussed in this chapter all point to the necessity of a sustained reflection on the issue of comparability. Far from simply being a
methodological issue, comparison or comparability rests on important philosophical presuppositions. But apart from some debate over the appropriateness of the label "comparative," the issue of comparability has received only scant attention in the literature. Chris Goto-Jones (2011, 104) is correct when he notes that "the problem of the method or practice of 'comparison' itself is seldom considered in a rigorous or critical manner in the literature and it is rarely pushed beyond the fluffy sense of inclusivity." Given that comparison is central to the practice and enterprise of CPT, as well as to social and political theorizing in general, in the next chapter I turn to a detailed examination of the issue of comparability in CPT. In order to engage this issue productively I draw attention to some of CPT’s early precursors who grappled with important philosophical difficulties related to and stemming from the practice of comparison.
CHAPTER 3
THE PROBLEM OF COMPARABILITY: COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY’S INTELLECTUAL PRECURSORS

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the project and foundational assumptions of CPT, as well as some important critiques that have emerged in response to recent arguments for the necessity of turning to comparative theorizing. I suggested that, in different ways, these critiques converge around one central issue that CPT practitioners have neglected to consider in a critical or rigorous manner, namely, the issue of comparability. In this chapter I argue that the absence of any sustained critical reflection about the practice of comparison – and more generally with what the gesture of comparison enables, precludes, and reinforces – constitutes an important omission on the part of CPT not least because, as Andrew March argues, it obscures CPT’s epistemological and normative motivations (2009, 533), as well as the connections with its intellectual precursors.

The primary aim of this chapter is, therefore, to foreground the issue of comparison and comparability in CPT. A renewed emphasis on this neglected area in CPT scholarship opens the way for an engagement with the subfield’s intellectual precursors. Specifically, this chapter traces CPT’s intellectual lineage to the project of comparative philosophy and the work of Spanish-Indian thinker Raimundo Panikkar, Indian philosopher J.L. Mehta, and the German Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass. Substantively, this chapter puts forward a critique of comparativism and takes CPT to task for not looking at the issues associated with the earlier history of comparative philosophy. These issues revolved around problems of comparison and comparability that invariably arise when one encounters the new and unfamiliar. The main challenge
that comparative philosophy faced and sought to overcome, which is also the same challenge faced by the current wave of CPT scholarship, can be expressed in the form of the following question: Is it possible to understand the thought and experience of non-Western “others”, to have a true dialogue with their traditions, without subsuming them within Western categories and patterns of thought? Deeply committed to the project of cross-cultural understanding, Panikkar, Mehta, and Halbfass nevertheless looked upon comparative philosophy with some degree of skepticism and suspicion. This chapter explores the reasons why these three thinkers, who are identified by Dallmayr as leading sources of philosophical inspiration behind CPT, ultimately viewed comparative philosophy as inadequate to the task of cross-cultural understanding. The chapter suggests that by ignoring the difficulties faced by earlier incarnations of the comparative project, CPT risks repeating comparative philosophy’s failure to broaden Western scholarly horizons and transform the West’s intellectual landscape.

In a second move, this chapter sets the stage for an explicit engagement with Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism and the ways in which comparative political theorists have taken up and extended his critique. Given that CPT explicitly defines itself as a project that seeks to disrupt the Eurocentrism of political theory so as to move contemporary scholarship beyond Orientalism, it is imperative to ask how, in the words of Fred Dallmayr, “the exit from Orientalism is sought and performed” (1996, 116). As I discussed in Chapter 1, one of the ways in which CPT has sought this “exit” has been to declare its dissatisfaction with the logocentrism and monologism of modern Western thought – and its corollaries, ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism – and to argue for the necessity of disrupting the false universalism of this hegemonic vision by the inclusion
of non-Western perspectives. Contra these assertions, the broader argument towards which this chapter gestures is that CPT cannot distance itself from Orientalism simply by calling for greater tolerance and cosmopolitan pluralism.

In its current form CPT shares a number of aims, commitments and questions with earlier, 18th and 19th century European efforts directed at cross-cultural understanding. This time period is important not only because it marks the European “rediscovery” of India (and the so-called East), but also because it marks the emergence of comparative philosophy – a field to which CPT traces its intellectual lineage – as a distinct academic discipline. As J. L. Mehta (1970, 307) observes, “the beginnings of comparative philosophy go back to the cultural encounter between India and the West toward the close of the eighteenth century” (See also Halbfass 1988). Importantly, the close of the 18th century also coincides with the beginnings of British colonial rule in India. While a number of studies have shown the ways in which British knowledge of India (including ancient Indian texts, languages, culture, laws, etc.) enabled colonial rule and domination (e.g., Cohn 1996; Mantena 2010), other forms of Orientalist scholarship, such as those pursued by German intellectuals, had as their aim the broadening of narrow European scholarly horizons. In a similar way, CPT today seeks to correct the perceived Eurocentric bias of political theory by turning to the study of non-Western texts and traditions of thought. The worry expressed by a number of scholars sympathetic to the enterprise of CPT is that the very effort to escape Eurocentrism and to create the conditions for post-Eurocentric modes of political inquiry paradoxically reinscribes and enables further Eurocentrism (see Jenco 2007, 2011; Godrej 2011).
With this in mind, the chapter will proceed in the following way. In the first section I explore the problem of comparability by turning to earlier instantiations of the comparative project as embodied in previous efforts to create the field of comparative philosophy to which CPT traces its intellectual origins. In particular, I discuss the implications of redescribing political theory as a “comparative” enterprise and explore the unexamined assumptions behind CPT’s choice of name. The bulk of the chapter will then be devoted to a careful exegesis of the work of Raimundo Panikkar, J.L. Mehta and Wilhelm Halbfass. While all three thinkers were deeply committed to cross-cultural comparative studies, they also expressed profound doubts about the comparative enterprise. I suggest that exploring the reasons for those doubts can help us understand whether and how CPT has been able to overcome some of the difficulties that attend the enterprise of cross-cultural understanding.

**Comparative Political Theory: What’s in a Name?**

What does it mean for the study and practice of political theory to be redescribed as “comparative”? Hasn’t political theory *always* involved some form of comparison? And isn’t political theory as practiced in the 21st century already comparative? In a certain sense, the answer to the last two questions is a simple ‘yes’. Roxanne Euben reminds us that the very etymology of the word “theory” (from the Greek *theôria* and *theôros*) is closely connected with the practice of comparison. Michaelle Browers, for her part, has similarly pointed out that many of the “greatest figures” of Western political thought – including but not limited to Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Marx and Mill – viewed their enterprise comparatively. “When the systematic study of politics emerged in ancient Greece,” Bowers writes, “it was both theoretical in nature and comparative in scope” (Bowers 2003, 7). For example,
Browsers reminds us that more than two and a half millennia ago, Aristotle in his *Politics* engaged in the comparative study of 150 political constitutions in the Mediterranean world in order to explain the stability and instability of different types of regimes. In *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu used a comparative approach to show differences and determine similarities among the laws, practices of government, and customs of various nations. Tocqueville’s magisterial *Democracy in America*, in which he sought to understand the significance of the new world for the old, is another famous example of comparative analysis undertaken by a political theorist (Browsers 2003, 8).

The use of comparison in political theory persists even today. Andrew March points to a wide variety of approaches commonly employed by political theorists that rely on the comparative method: these include comparative studies of different political thinkers, diachronic studies of particular topics or issues within and across societies, genealogical studies of the origins and evolutions of various concepts, and the comparative study of colonial and postcolonial discourses (March 2009, 536). March concludes from this that comparative methods are already assumed to be part of political theory (ibid, 537). If political theory has always involved some form of comparison, then the challenge for CPT practitioners is to explain what justifies the addition of the moniker “comparative” and what makes their enterprise different from the broader field of political theory, which already employs comparative methods as a matter of course. In other words, isn’t the name “comparative political theory” a tautology?

A sympathetic critic like March charges that the way in which CPT is currently practiced is at odds with what he believes a properly conceived comparative project
should look like. He suggests that all comparative projects require “both a conception of meaningful distinction and a common object of inquiry” and goes on to show that CPT does not always meet these two basic criteria (March 2009, 547). But beyond this, even March’s attempt to tease out CPT’s implicit assumptions about what precisely makes their project “comparative” does not offer much by way of a critical analysis of the method and practice of comparison. Nevertheless, the significance of March’s intervention should not be overlooked. His assessment of CPT draws attention to the need for a sustained focus on comparison and the problem of comparability.

To concentrate on the appropriateness of the label “comparative” as a description of the work that falls under the rubric of CPT, as well as on the gesture of comparison more broadly, might be construed as an overly pedantic exercise. After all, one might argue, a more meaningful engagement with the project of CPT would focus on the substance of their studies rather than on the how, or the method, of their work. That is to say, what matters is not so much whether CPT lives up to its name – indeed names can always be changed – but what it actually contributes to the study of political life. And yet the fact remains that, for better or worse, the emerging subfield has settled on “comparative” as its descriptive moniker – not “global,” “international,” “transnational,” “cosmopolitan,” or even “dialogic.”¹ As Andrew March suggests, this choice is neither arbitrary nor without effect:

To call for a subfield labeled comparative political theory is at once to make a statement about its importance and about the moral and intellectual implications of the broader discipline having ignored it for so long. It invokes the status of other comparative disciplines such as comparative political science or comparative law, while at the same time obscuring some of its

¹ But see Godrej (2011) who has recently sought to make a case for the development of “cosmopolitan” political thought.
own more particular epistemological and normative motivations, which are not necessarily implied by the term ‘comparative’ alone. To speak of ‘comparative political theory’ is to claim an importance, an urgency, and a validity within the broader fields of political theory and political science. Such an importance, urgency, and validity may indeed be in order. But it is not a trivial claim (March 2009, 533; emphasis in original).

I share March’s conclusion that CPT needs to clarify its normative and methodological assumptions. This is important not only because, as March suggests, CPT promises to influence the academic practice of political theory. Beyond its significance for the broader field of political theory, CPT has also made claims that reveal its larger political aspirations: by suggesting that comparative theorizing can contribute to global peace, CPT has assumed for itself the ambitious task of creating a more just and equitable world. Underlying the practice of CPT is the belief that by opening theory to the diversity of a globalizing world, CPT will enhance global democracy. These are certainly not offhand remarks and their underlying assumptions deserve to be examined, not least because such statements suggest a role for CPT that stands at odds with its simultaneous claim that Western practitioners of political theory “must relinquish the role of universal teacher[s] (buttressed by Western hegemony) and be content with that of fellow student[s] in a cross-cultural learning experience” (Dallmayr 1997, 422).

One way to understand CPT’s choice of name and its broader political aspirations is to compare its emergence in the late 20th century to the creation of the field of comparative literature. When comparative literature emerged as an independent discipline in the 19th century, the term “comparative” implied something more than the act of juxtaposing two or more national literatures, authors, etc. Comparative literature emerged in an era of growing European imperialist nationalism, that is, in an era in
which the world was at war. The comparative project grew out of a desire to address
and combat the conflictual situation in Europe by “affirming a transnational spirit in the
human sciences” (Lasner quoted in Chow 2006, 79). As Rey Chow explains, “with its
goal of bringing together different national traditions of fiction through the democratic
notion of world literature, comparativism was advanced as a possible peaceful remedy
to intercultural conflict” (2006, 22). The term “comparative,” therefore, implied a
resistance to nationalism and stood as a shorthand for broader political ambitions,
which included global peace, cosmopolitanism, and intercultural hospitality. But as one
commentator notes, the irony was that this form of critical resistance to nationalism
“ended up constructing an androcentric Continentalism that became its own exclusivity”
(Lasner quoted in Chow 2006, 80).

The similarities with CPT should be apparent. CPT emerged in a historical
context dominated by the resurgence of rhetoric in support of empire, the “war on terror”
and deepening globalization. Like the project of comparative literature before it, CPT
aims to transcend national boundaries to create a more inclusive political thought.
Furthermore, the project of CPT can be understood as the study of encounters with
non-Western texts and traditions of thought – that is, as the study of the encounter with
difference. The most obvious way of grappling with similarities and differences across
various traditions of political thought is via comparison. Indeed, comparison seems to be
one of the first ways through which the new or the foreign can be approached. As
Xudon Zhang (2005, 81) notes, “questions of comparison and comparability emerge
whenever interactions between different socioeconomic, political and cultural systems
take place.” We understand something unfamiliar by relating it to something that we
already know and is familiar to us. But as we have already seen, the way in which CPT is currently practiced – namely, by bringing non-Western political thought uncritically into dialogue with the Western canon – and CPT’s larger goals seem to be at odds with what some sympathetic critics believe a comparative project should look like.

But what is meant by “comparison”? How is comparison carried out? We can begin to find answers to these questions by turning to some of CPT’s intellectual antecedents. As I indicated in my introduction, Dallmayr traces the intellectual lineage of CPT to the field of “comparative philosophy” and the work of J.L. Mehta, Raimundo Panikkar, and Wilhelm Halbfass among others. Dallmayr looks to these thinkers as offering important examples of what a post-Orientalist inquiry might look like. But because Dallmayr does not frame his commentary on the work of these thinkers in relation to their broader concerns about the possibility of an autonomous discipline of “comparative philosophy,” he does not foreground and critically engage their skepticism with regards to the motivations and possibility of cross-cultural dialogue and a genuine cross-cultural encounter.²

Another important omission on the part of Dallmayr is that he does not discuss at length the requirements for comparative inquiry beyond suggesting that “such inquiry has to steer between the twin dangers of exclusivist distinctness and nondistinction, or radical difference and sameness” (Dallmayr 1996, 140). What Dallmayr means is that to stress the radical difference between cultures and traditions of thought precludes the

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² To be sure, in the case of Halbfass, Dallmayr does point to a noticeable tendency in his later work to call into question the enterprise of cross-cultural understanding. It is at this point that Dallmayr’s sympathy for Halbfass’s work grinds to a halt. Dallmayr is critical of Halbfass’s distantiating from the project of hermeneutical understanding and his subsequent turn to Anglo-American analytical philosophy (and analytic methods) as allowing for a truly universal understanding of different philosophical traditions (Dallmayr 1996, 123).
possibility of comparison altogether because any commonality or commensurability between these traditions is denied at the outset. According to Dallmayr, such an approach frustrates “mutuality and reciprocal engagement” (ibid). Conversely, to assert the total commensurability or sameness between cultures and traditions of thought is to thwart the possibility of contestation, and to negate difference and distinction.

Dallmayr is right to suggest that a properly conducted comparative inquiry would strive to find the right balance between these two equally untenable extremes. He is also right not to legislate when and how it can take place. But his reflections do not shed much light on the nature, meaning, and difficulties that attend the practice of comparison. Granted, this is not Dallmayr’s aim. Nevertheless, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, renewed attention to what the gesture of comparison consists in, reinforces and enables might shed light on some of CPT’s current difficulties as well as reveal possible ways of overcoming them.

The gesture of comparison. Broadly understood, comparison can be defined as the examination of two or more items to establish similarities and differences between them. For example, Raimundo Panikkar (1988, 122) observes that for any comparison to take place “three things are required: at least two comparanda, and the comparans, which is a third element that has to be equally distant from and outside the comparanda, the things to be compared.” Comparison, therefore, implies some form of objectification and a neutral standpoint from which we can compare. It is grounded on a certain distancing that the comparans (or the subject who compares) must assume in relation to the comparanda. Importantly, as Panikkar suggests, there is a universalizing aspect to comparison and comparative studies. Since “any comparison has somehow to
transcend its subject matter” the central goal of comparative studies could most simply be described as the search for universals (ibid). Halbfass (1994b, 298) similarly notes that comparison “remains committed to a morphological viewpoint, which aims at the discovery of pervasive structures and general, objectifiable laws in any field to which it is applied.” The aim, in effect, is to reach a higher plane of generality or abstraction, and bring into view the larger totality of which the elements or units compared are a part. For example, in the case of comparative literature, Charles Bernheimer (1995, 4) describes the goal of comparison as that of perceiving “the literary world in its fundamental unity.”

As the etymology of the word suggests, comparison is grounded in the notion of parity, that is, “in the peer-like equality and mutuality among those [units] being compared” (Chow 2006, 72-73). In short, the act of comparison assumes a “level playing field” (Spivak 2009, 609). The comparability of different entities or units “implies an alikeness of what is to be compared and, hence, an identity under which they are to be subsumed” (Gache 2007, 179). This means that in order to compare two or more entities it is necessary to have confidence that the properties of the things being compared are the ‘same’, that they demonstrate some equivalence. We cannot compare two things without first constructing a common scale that allows us to identify the two items as comparable in terms of some given category. According to Panikkar (1980, 360), this common scale can only be found if the “comparer and the compared stand on a common ground where they are in agreement in applying a particular criterion as the comparans.” But, as he observes, it is precisely the nature of this common ground that presents difficulties.

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3 Bernheimer is here channeling the view of François Jost, who argued that “the comparativist’s effort and reward is to perceive the literary world in its fundamental unity” (Jost quoted in Bernheimer 1995, 3).
Philosopher Daya Krishna sheds further light on the difficulties of comparison and the privileged position of the subject who compares. He describes comparative studies as the “attempt to look at what, by definition, is ‘another reality’ from the viewpoint of that which is not itself” (Krishna 1988, 72). This contradiction is glossed over “by the appeal to the universalism of all knowledge and the identification of all knowledge with the privileged ‘us’ from whose viewpoint all other societies and cultures are judged and evaluated” (ibid). Krishna locates the roots of the privileged position of the observer in “the political and economic power” of the society of which the observer happens to be a member (ibid). Historically, this privileged position has been occupied by the West and has been the result of over 300 years of Western political and economic expansion. As Krishna writes, “comparative studies were primarily a search for facts or a reporting of data in terms of the conceptual structure already formulated in the West” (ibid, 73). Offering a slightly different and more sharply critical take on the “comparative method” deployed by these studies, Johan Fabian (2002, 16-17) refers to it as an “omnivorous intellectual machine” into which scholars feed various data selected with supposed “positivist neutrality and detachment.” Easily overlooked in this process is the fact that the products of this machine – the taxonomies and developmental stages – “[are] anything but historically and politically neutral” (ibid, 17; emphasis in original).

Comparative studies, in effect, stood for the comparison of other societies and cultures in terms of the norms and categories provided by and imposed by the West. This made for an unequal encounter and exchange of ideas, creating a situation of intellectual dependency. According to Krishna, scholars in the non-West, whose
societies were the object of study and comparison, “accepted the norms provided by western scholars and tried to show that the achievements in various fields within their cultures paralleled those in the West, so that they could not be regarded as inferior in any way” (1988, 72). While this dependency was not total, it was certainly widespread and, according to some scholars, persists even today. It is in this context that the question of Eurocentrism (Westcentrism) and the possibility of overcoming it so as to create the conditions for a more balanced encounter begin to emerge.

In considering the possibility of an independent discipline of comparative philosophy and a genuine cross-cultural encounter, Panikkar, Halbfass, and Mehta framed their discussion with an explicit awareness of the aforementioned problems. At the time they wrote, all three thinkers looked upon comparative philosophy (and comparative studies more generally) with some amount of skepticism and suspicion. If comparative philosophy was understood, in the words of Daya Krishna, as “the imposition of the standards of one dominant culture upon all the others and the evaluation of their philosophical achievements in terms of those alien standards” (1988, 83), Mehta, Panikkar and Halbfass asked whether it was possible to understand the thought and experience of ‘others’, to have a true dialogue with their traditions, without subsuming them within Western categories and models of understanding. In what follows, I elaborate on each of their respective positions in turn.

**Panikkar’s Dialogical or Imparative Philosophy**

The work of Spanish-Indian thinker Raimundo Panikkar (1928-2010) is a frequent reference point in Dallmayr’s ruminations on the task of comparative theorizing and the

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4 Panikkar coins the term “imparative philosophy” from the Latin _imparare_, meaning “to learn.”
possibility of cross-cultural dialogue (see Dallmayr 1996, 2002, 2004). A Roman Catholic priest, Panikkar is perhaps best known for his intellectual contributions to cross-cultural hermeneutics and was one of the leading proponents of interreligious dialogue. Trained in multiple disciplines including theology, philosophy and science, for Dallmayr (2002, 190) Panikkar is the epitome of a “multidimensional” thinker, i.e., the kind of thinker that can respond to the needs of our “multicultural age.” As another one of his interpreters writes, Panikkar claimed to be at home in four distinct worlds: “the Christian, in which he was brought up; the Hindu, the world of his father; the Buddhist; and the modern secular world” (Prabhu 1996, 1). Aside from the cross-cultural scope of his learning, his familiarity with both Western and non-Western philosophies and religions, and the ease with which he both moved between and reconciled these different worlds, Panikkar’s work appeals to Dallmayr because it aligns on a number of issues with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and Heidegger’s call for “planetary thinking” are two prominent sources from which CPT, at least as articulated by Dallmayr, draws inspiration.

It is interesting to note that Panikkar’s intellectual development shares a common trajectory with that of Dallmayr. Just as Dallmayr’s first visit to India in the early 1980s marked an important turning point in his work, Panikkar's first visit to the land of his father in 1954 had a similar effect. He described the experience as a turning point in his spiritual life: “I left Europe as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be Christian” (Panikkar cited in Grimes 2010, 5)

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5 He received separate doctoral degree in all three fields.
Thereafter Panikkar would devote his life and work to “prepar[ing] the ground for an authentic dialogue between Christianity and other faiths, and beyond that for the cross-cultural conversation which marks our globalized world” (quoted in Grimes 2010, np). For Dallmayr in particular, Panikkar’s intellectual contributions are to be found in his call for a dialogical or imparative philosophy, which expresses itself in a persistent criticism both of a “bland universalism neglectful of differences and a narrow (ethnic or religious) particularism hostile to reciprocal learning” (Dallmayr 2002, 190).

While Dallmayr highlights Panikkar’s dialogical philosophy as an important source of inspiration for CPT, he neglects to inform readers that Panikkar articulated this model as a way of overcoming some of the difficulties of comparative philosophy I outlined earlier. This silence and the relative absence of critical engagement with CPT’s intellectual predecessors not only hides from view the difficulties and complexities that attend cross-cultural understanding, it also occludes the motivations for comparative theorizing and creates the impression that studying and learning about others is an innocent, well-intentioned, apolitical act. The question of “who is doing the studies” and “who is studied” is thus hidden from view. As this project argues, we cannot neglect this dimension of cross-cultural studies for the sake of emphasizing the benevolent and enlightening aspects of knowledge. To be sure, CPT practitioners are not unaware of the gross economic and political inequalities that overshadow cross-cultural encounters today. And yet, the very recognition of this state of affairs has produced a kind of intellectual paralysis whereby critical engagement with non-Western work is substituted for a merely appreciative cataloguing of the diversity of existing traditions of political
thought – a gesture which paradoxically seems to reproduce the epistemic violence these practitioners seek to move beyond.

If CPT claims to get its bearings from comparative philosophy, it is important to gain a better understanding of the reasons why a number of influential twentieth century thinkers viewed comparative philosophy as inadequate to the task of cross-cultural understanding. To single out a tradition of cross-cultural inquiry as a guiding model without a thorough engagement with its assumptions and conclusions risks uncritically repeating some of the difficulties this tradition failed to overcome. This does not mean that CPT should condemn and renounce its connection with comparative philosophy. Rather, I argue that CPT needs to be more explicit about what it sees as productive in the project of comparative philosophy and how it proposes to overcome some of its limitations.

**Panikkar on the limits of comparative philosophy.** Panikkar’s essay “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” is particularly instructive in clarifying some of the complexities attending the comparative enterprise, as well as in raising important methodological questions that CPT scholars must also contend with. At the time he penned this essay, comparative philosophy, like CPT today, was considered a fledgling enterprise “still searching for its own identity and justification” (Panikkar 1988, 122). Panikkar’s essay is thus a useful reference point not only because it highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of comparative philosophy, but also because it offers an important vision of what cross-cultural understanding could look like.

Panikkar views comparative philosophy as a product of colonialism and argues that “comparative studies are still fashionable today because they belong to that thrust
toward universalization characteristic of western culture.” Given that the West is no longer able “to dominate other peoples politically,” Panikkar writes, “it tries to maintain – most of the time unconsciously – a certain control by striving toward a global picture of the world by means of comparative studies” (1988, 116). As Panikkar sees it, comparative studies, and comparative philosophy in particular, are limited by this inbuilt thrust towards homogenization, which expresses itself in the attempt to overcome the plurality of traditions of thought and aims to create a single world view. Panikkar’s aim in this essay is precisely to challenge the claims to universality on the part of Western philosophy. As he writes, the purpose of his essay it to dispel the “illusion [of] ‘World Government,’ ‘Global Village,’ ‘One Technology,’ ‘World Market,’ ‘Civilization,’ lingua universalis, one single world view, a universal philosophy called comparative philosophy; in short, the monomorphism of a monolithic reality” (1988, 118).

Panikkar’s central thesis is that comparative philosophy is ultimately an impossible independent discipline and he argues that the concept itself is inherently self-contradictory. This is so because “philosophy claims to be ultimate by nature” (Panikkar 1980, 357) – that is, it admits of no higher authority than itself – and yet for philosophy to be truly comparative there needs to be a neutral fulcrum outside the philosophies being compared. As Panikkar writes, “If philosophy is an ultimately human affair, comparative philosophy could only be handled from a superhuman standpoint” (1988, 122). But for Panikkar such a neutral standpoint does not exist. This contradiction leads Panikkar to say that “comparative philosophy is an impossible independent discipline, which nevertheless thrives in the very recognition of its impossibility” (ibid, 116).
Having set up this apparent paradox, Panikkar begins his essay by inquiring after the status of comparative philosophy (CP). If comparative philosophy is to be an independent discipline with its proper method and subject matter, it needs to distinguish itself from the history of philosophy and from that type of philosophy, which is based on the critique of previous philosophies (Panikkar 1988, 117). “Otherwise,” Panikkar argues, “we give only a new name to an old discipline” (ibid). Just as political theory can claim that it has always involved some form of comparison, Panikkar similarly writes that all philosophy (and all thinking) is intrinsically (and perhaps unavoidably) comparative because “it compares itself with other systems of thought and builds on those analyses” (ibid). If one accepts the claim that all philosophy arises either as a critique or completion of previous philosophy – and given that philosophers stand in some form of dialogue with their forerunners and with the surrounding philosophical world – it is plausible to argue that philosophy has always been a comparative enterprise. And yet, Panikkar suggests that this definition of comparative philosophy is inadequate. It is inadequate because it makes CP indistinguishable from philosophy proper, even as comparative philosophy claims to be an autonomous discipline, one that seeks to “thematically compare two, or more, or all philosophical views and give them a fair treatment without…necessarily subscribing to any of them” (ibid, 118). To get a better understanding of what comparative philosophy is, Panikkar argues that we must begin by asking: “what kind of philosophy is comparative philosophy?” (Panikkar 1998, 118) Is it a philosophy that passes judgments on all other philosophies or “a metaphilosophy that amounts to another philosophy?” As he exclaims, “the dilemma seems insurmountable” (ibid, 120).
To resolve this difficulty, Panikkar examines a number of common approaches to comparative philosophy: transcendental philosophy; structural or formal philosophy; linguistic philosophy; phenomenological philosophy; and dialogical or imperative philosophy. All five approaches are discussed and, with the exception of dialogical philosophy, are shown to be insufficient bases for a truly independent comparative philosophy. For Panikkar, the main problem with all four approaches is that, in different ways, they all assume a universally accepted criterion for comparison. As Panikkar puts this, they all "pretend to possess a fulcrum outside time and space and above any other philosophy from which to scrutinize the different human philosophical constructs" (Panikkar 1988, 128). This makes for a one-sided encounter with other traditions of thought since the comparisons are made from the point of view of one single philosophy. What falls from view in such an encounter is the fact that other traditions of thought express themselves according to their own categories and self-understandings. Stated differently, what such approaches fail to recognize is that the “other,” just like the self, is also an original source of human understanding (Panikkar 1980, 372; also Panikkar 1979). For Panikkar, then, comparative philosophy’s main weakness is its initial stance or point of departure. It naively believes that it can assume a point of view neutral to the philosophies compared. Not only is such a neutral or objective vantage point impossible by definition, for Panikkar the assumption of such a stance also precludes the possibility of a genuine conversation with and learning from other traditions of thought.

As an alternative to these four approaches, Panikkar proposes what he calls dialogical or imperative philosophy. A dialogical or imperative mode of philosophizing
reflects “an open philosophical attitude ready to learn from whatever philosophical corner of the world, but without claiming to compare philosophies from an objective, neutral, and transcendent vantage point” (Panikkar 1988, 127). It reflects the conviction that “we cannot escape taking a stand somewhere when we philosophize” and recognizes that this apparent limitation “makes our philosophizing relative to similar enterprises undertaken from different angles” (ibid, 128). Most importantly, this mode of philosophizing does not claim to occupy a neutral ground outside or above any other philosophy from which it can pass judgment on the different philosophical experiences of others. Instead it recognizes that, like any approach, it too necessarily and unavoidably rests upon certain presuppositions, and is “constitutively ready to question its most basic foundations if this is requested by any other philosophical school” (ibid).

Unlike comparative philosophy, implicative philosophy proceeds from the awareness that most philosophies regard themselves as unique and ultimate. This means that “we cannot justifiably compare, that is, bring together (com) on an equal (par) footing, that which purports to be unique and uncomparable” (Panikkar 1988, 127). Instead, Panikkar argues, we may learn (imparare) by “being ready to undergo the different philosophical experiences of other people” (ibid). Implicative philosophy, therefore, does not formally compare; rather, it is best understood as a “bringing together” of disparate worldviews (ibid, 128). As Panikkar writes in an earlier articulation of implicative philosophy, such a mode of understanding refuses to enter the “deadly game of domination by comparison” characteristic of older comparativist approaches (Panikkar 1980, 372). Despite their genuine efforts to understand other philosophies or religions on their own terms, Panikkar argues that these older approaches always took
the same form – that of a “double monologue” in which each party, while sincerely attempting to work out what the other meant, ultimately aimed at defeating the other by winning them over to my worldview (ibid, 371).

In stark contrast to comparative philosophy, imparative philosophy is open to a “dialogical dialogue” with other philosophical traditions (Panikkar 1988, 129). Its ultimate goal is communication and mutual understanding, not coming to a total agreement with the other, or conversion to my worldview, to my ways of thinking, living, believing. Dialogical philosophy seeks to “bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak out their own insights in their own languages (Panikkar 1978, xxvii). What this approach entails is a continual crossing of boundaries from one culture, language, philosophy or religion to another. Its aim is “not the imposition of one philosophy or one mode of understanding, but the forging of a common universe of discourse” in the actual dialogical encounter (Panikkar 1988, 132). For, as Panikkar writes, “it is in the dialogue itself that the way is paved for eliminating misunderstandings, and where criticism and eventually mutual fecundation may take place (1980, 375).

6 Alongside imparative philosophy and diatopical hermeneutics, “dialogical dialogue” is a pivotal idea in Panikkar’s theory of cross-cultural understanding. Panikkar distinguishes between two aspects of dialogue: dialectical and dialogical. Dialectical dialogue belongs to the realm of logos and human reason. Panikkar describes it as a technique of argumentation, “a technique which empowers one to pass judgments on other people’s opinions” (Panikkar 1984, 207). Governed by the principle of non-contradiction, this type of dialogue is a dialogue about objects, opinions, doctrines, views, i.e. it is concerned with the encounter between ideas, with the objects of thought. As Panikkar explains, dialectical dialogue “elevates Reason as the ultimate judge, as the arbiter between contrasting opinions or positions, able to discern the difference between truth and falsehood. Because one cannot at the same agree and not agree, in the process of dialectical dialogue, one party either has to give up one’s opinion or agree with the opinion of the other” (ibid). As such, the goal of a dialectical dialogue is to prove that something is true. Panikkar argues that dialectical dialogue can be used as an instrument of power. By contrast “dialogical dialogue pierces the logos and uncovers the respective myths of partners. It is a dialogue between and about subjects” (1999, 37). It does not replace dialectics but seeks to complement it.
The passage to a non-conflictual, non-dominative, and non-dialectical encounter calls for a new way of understanding other traditions and ways of life. Panikkar proposes “diatopical” hermeneutics as the proper approach to cross-cultural understanding:

Diatopical hermeneutics is the required method of interpretation when the distance to overcome, needed for any understanding, is not just a distance within one single culture (morphological hermeneutics), or a temporal one (diachronic hermeneutics), but rather the distance between two (or more) cultures, which have independently developed in different spaces (topoi) their own methods of philosophizing and ways of reaching intelligibility along with their proper categories (Panikkar 1988, 130).

Panikkar describes diatopical hermeneutics as the third kairological moment in the hermeneutic enterprise, which is comprised of three interrelated ways of overcoming the epistemological distance between interpreter and interpreted. This is distinguished from two more common forms of hermeneutics – morphological and diachronical. In the former understanding takes place within a single tradition or culture. This type of hermeneutics is exemplified in the transmission of a given culture’s meanings to the young. In the diachronical model, understanding again occurs within a single tradition, but the distance to be overcome has widened across historical time. In both cases, members of these traditions are able to gain understanding because they find themselves within a common horizon of meaning. As Panikkar writes, “we understand because we are within a hermeneutic circle” (1988, 130).

Although these two hermeneutical moments are indispensible for a complete hermeneutical process, they fall short when it comes to understanding radically different traditions and worldviews, which do not have cultural or direct historical links with one another. For Panikkar, the greatest obstacle in any encounter between very different cultures and traditions is the absence of a shared hermeneutic circle or horizon of
meaning. Indeed, how can we understand something that does not belong to our circle? Panikkar illustrates the challenges involved in this process by way of the following example: “If I smile to a monkey in sign of friendship the ape is likely to attack me. He sees my teeth and interprets my behavior as a sign of wanting to bite him. If I move the head vertically up and down some people will understand that I agree, and others that I disagree” (Panikkar 1988, 130-131). How, then, do we avoid misunderstanding what another person, culture, philosophy, etc., has to say? As Panikkar (1988, 131) asks, “How do we communicate with another culture prior to handing down the keys to deciphering our message? [...] How do we cross the boundaries for the first time toward another totally independent culture?”

It is here that diatopical hermeneutics comes into play. Emerging in response to the challenge of interpreting across cultural boundaries in the absence of a shared hermeneutic circle, the fundamental assumption of diatopical hermeneutics is that the other does not have the same basic self-understanding as I have. Diatopical hermeneutics views the other not as an object of my knowledge but as a subject, another self who is both a source of self-understanding and of independent understanding, which is not reducible to my own (Panikkar 1984, 214-217). In turn, this has important consequences for how we understand other cultures, philosophies, religious traditions, etc. Given that members of other cultures are original sources of self-understanding, Panikkar believes that we do not have the right to impose our categories and patterns of understanding on them. We cannot and should not assume the existence of a common language or hermeneutic circle. Rather, Panikkar insists, we have to forge this circle through the existential encounter with the other, in dialogical
dialogue with the other. Diatopical hermeneutics is not simply a theory, it is also a praxis. It suggests that we cannot understand another culture, religion or tradition of thought unless we participate and immerse ourselves, at least to some extent, in that tradition’s universe of discourse. For example, as Panikkar explains, if we want to interpret and understand a different philosophy “we will have to attend to the school of that philosophy and immerse ourselves in its universe of discourse as far as possible for us. We will have to overcome our parameters and plunge into a participatory process of which we may not be able to foresee the outcome” (Panikkar 1988, 133). Diatopical hermeneutics here emerges as a creative encounter, one that does not prescribe hard and fast rules for interpretation.

Panikkar compares the process of understanding that takes place in diatopical hermeneutics to learning a new language. At first we translate by comparing with the mother tongue, but as our proficiency increases we begin to think and speak directly in the other language. As Panikkar argues, “Only those persons who, for one reason or another, have existentially crossed the borders of at least two cultures and are at home in either, shall be able first to understand and then to translate” (1988, 133). In a similar way, diatopical hermeneutics functions between two *topoi*, not between many: it brings one culture, language, or philosophy into the sphere of intelligibility of another culture, language or religion, making it understandable (ibid). It encourages both partners to cross over to the other tradition and then cross back to their own. The experience is one of growth and mutual enrichment. Diatopical hermeneutics assumes that the interpreter is not only able to enter into and experience the symbolic world of the other, but that she can also integrate this it into her own tradition. It is only in this way that we may begin to
understand the other according to the other’s self-understanding. Panikkar’s emphasis on the role of immersion in reaching understanding is something that CPT scholars like Farah Godrej and Leigh Jenco have picked up on and sought to develop further. I discuss the ways in which they have extended and applied Panikkar’s insights in the next chapter.

**J.L. Mehta’s Hermeneutics**

A contemporary of Panikkar, the work of Indian philosopher J.L. Mehta (1912-1988) is similarly concerned with the problem of understanding and the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue. Mehta studied the philosophies of Gadamer and Heidegger. He taught at Banaras Hindu University and spent ten years at Harvard Divinity School (1968-1978) where he taught courses on hermeneutics and Indian philosophy. Although he devoted his scholarly career to a sustained reflection on the philosophical and religious encounter between India and the West, unlike Panikkar Mehta never developed a full-fledged philosophy of dialogue or a theory of cross-cultural understanding. The majority of his work consists of essays he prepared for various conferences and symposia to which he was invited. Despite the fact that he never produced a full-length study devoted to a systematic exposition of his ideas, Mehta’s numerous essays reveal a preoccupation with a number of recurring themes. In this section, I focus explicitly on those essays in which Mehta attempts to illuminate the nature and aim of cross-cultural understanding, as well as on his commentaries on

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7 In this section I draw primarily on the essays and lectures collected in three of Mehta’s books: *India and the West: The Problem of Understanding* (1985), *J.L. Mehta on Heidegger, Hermeneutics and the Indian Tradition* (1992), and *Philosophy and Religion: Essays in Interpretation* (1990). His other essays may be found in *Language Reality and Other Papers* (1968).
comparative philosophy. Given the focus of this chapter and the overall thrust of the dissertation, I do not claim to offer an exhaustive interpretation of Mehta’s corpus.\(^8\)

In the West, J.L. Mehta is perhaps best remembered as one of the foremost interpreters of Heidegger in whose work he claims to have discovered helpful guidance that would liberate Indian thinkers (and the East more generally) from subservience to Western categories, paving the way for an Indian “Swaraj in Ideas”.\(^9\) In Heidegger’s work Mehta glimpsed a pathway to dismantling Western dominance, an opening that could create the space for a world in which East and West “would relate not as conquered and Conquistador, not as daydreamy dupe and clever cardsharp, but as fellow humans in ultimate endeavors” (Jackson 1992, 2). The few available commentaries on his protean corpus, which primarily consist of prefaces or introductions to his collections of essays, unanimously praise Mehta for his profound knowledge of continental philosophy and the ease with which he moved between Western and Eastern thought. In a chapter dedicated to an exposition of some of Mehta’s central concerns, Dallmayr (1996, 90) approvingly describes the thinker as a citizen of two worlds: “More perhaps than most non-Western intellectuals of our time, Mehta was genuinely a citizen of two cultural worlds, carefully seeking to explore the precarious pathways between the two without lapsing into a bland syncretism.” Elsewhere William Jackson (1992, 2) describes in similar terms Mehta’s negotiation of

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9 Swaraj translates as freedom or self-determination.
the two distinct traditions, noting that his work “strives with an Eastern will and concern *through* Western language, toward a more globally-aware interrelated East and West.”

In many respects, Mehta’s intellectual trajectory mirrors that of Panikkar and Dallmayr. If the latter two’s journey towards India profoundly marked their subsequent intellectual concerns, Mehta’s journey to the West (here understood as both the Western continental tradition and his extended sojourns in both Germany and the US) had a similar effect on his thought. As Michel de Certeau has remarked, no one returns unchanged from an encounter with the other (Giard 1991, 216). While this is certainly the case for all three thinkers, it rings especially true for Mehta for whom the extended encounter with the Western other served to clear the way for his eventual “homecoming,” a return that would point him back to a renewed concern with classical Indian thought: “only through this voyage into the foreign and the strange can we win back our own self-hood; here as elsewhere the way to what is closest to us is the longest way back” (Mehta 1992, 92). For Mehta, the journey out into the “alien, the questionable and the unhomelike” (ibid) must culminate not simply in the understanding of the other. Because understanding has the character of mutuality, Mehta argued that understanding others must ultimately culminate in the understanding of self (1992, 272).

This brief introduction to Mehta’s work already raises a number of questions. Why does Mehta single out the work of Heidegger as particularly important to the task of liberating Indian thought from subservience to Western categories and patterns of understanding? How can Heidegger, who on Mehta’s own reading, expressed such profound disinterest for the tradition of Indian philosophy, help India (and the East) to

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regain its voice? To answer these questions we must direct our gaze to Mehta’s chief
intellectual concerns. Irrespective of the different thematic orientation of his essays, in
many of his writings Mehta consistently returns to address one of the main challenges
faced by India and its intellectuals. This challenge received a strong articulation in 1931,
when Hindu philosopher K.C. Bhattacharyya pointed to the need for an Indian “Swaraj
in ideas.” Bhattacharyya lamented the fact that many Indian intellectuals had uncritically
assimilated Western styles of critique and interpretation, with the result that many now
peered into their own ancient tradition of philosophical and religious thought with the
attitude of foreign oriental scholars, treating it both as an object of curiosity and as
something not deserving of sustained attention (1954, 2). As Bhattacharyya wrote, “We
either accept or repeat the judgments passed on us by Western culture, or we
impotently resent them but have hardly any estimate of our own” (1954, 3).

A similar situation obtains in the realm of philosophy. Even here, Bhattacharyya
writes, hardly anything has been written by Indian intellectuals to show that they have
achieved a synthesis of Indian and Western philosophical thought: “There is nothing like
a judgment on Western systems from the standpoint of Indian philosophy, and although
some appraisement of Indian philosophy has been attempted from the Western
standpoint, there appears to be no recognition yet that a criticism of the fundamental
notions of either philosophy is necessary before there can be any useful comparative
estimate” (1954, 4). This was a particularly puzzling state of affairs because, on
Bhattacharyya’s view, it is precisely in the realm of philosophy that one could look for
effective contact between East and West (ibid).
For Bhattacharyya, this intellectual dependency was the product of a much more pernicious form of domination, which he termed “cultural subjection.” Liberation from this condition could come about through a Swaraj or self-determination in ideas:

Man’s domination over man is felt in the most tangible form in the political sphere. There is however a subtler domination exercised in the sphere of ideas by one culture on another, a domination all the more serious in its consequence, because it is not ordinarily felt. Political subjection primarily means restraint on the outer life of a people and although it tends gradually to sink into the inner life of the soul, the fact that one is conscious of it operates against the tendency. So long as one is conscious of a restraint, it is possible to resist it or to bear it as a necessary evil and to keep free in spirit. Slavery begins when one ceases to feel the evil and it deepens when the evil is accepted as good. Cultural subjection is ordinarily of an unconscious character and it implies slavery from the very start. When I speak of cultural subjection, I do not mean the assimilation of an alien culture. That assimilation need not be an evil; it may be positively necessary for healthy progress and in any case does not mean a lapse of freedom. There is cultural subjection only when one’s traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture, which possesses one like a ghost. This subjection is slavery of the spirit: when a person can shake himself free from it, he feels as thought the scales fall from his eyes. He experiences a rebirth and that is what I call a Swaraj in ideas (1954, 1).

Like Bhattacharyya, Mehta believed that one of the primary tasks facing India was “the task of a critical and creative understanding of our own religious [and philosophical] tradition” (1985, 115). However, this endeavor was made difficult by the ways in which Western thinkers had interpreted non-Western thought. According to Mehta, Westerners approach and interpret Eastern thought and experience in terms of Western categories. He argued that Western thought (understood as western metaphysical thought or philosophy) enters the non-Western world like a Trojan horse, “not like a bullet hitting a body or a piece of stone shattering a glass plane on impact, but like a virus…invisibly altering our perception of reality” (1992, 257). The result is that even in its self-representation and self-assertion India speaks in terms of this altered
perception, i.e., in a Western idiom and voice. Although Mehta does not believe in the possibility of restoring a vanished authenticity – indeed he calls this “a nostalgic dream” (1992, 258) – he does want to ask whether India can regain its self-hood and emerge from the shadow of what Heidegger has called “world-civilization.” Given the dominance of Western metaphysical thinking Mehta additionally ponders whether it is still possible to have a true dialogue between civilizations, a dialogue unconditioned by “the planetary impact of Western thought” (1985, 257).

Mehta follows Husserl, and especially Heidegger, and accepts the thesis that the progressive “Europeanization of the earth and mankind” is the “strange destiny in which the whole world is caught up” (Mehta 1970, 312). Following Heidegger, Mehta understands the ascendancy of the West not as a mere peril facing mankind, but very much as an inescapable reality – one from which there is no defense. As he elaborates, there is no direct way of challenging it “because no defense can be enduringly effective against it” (Mehta 1992, 91). Mehta recognizes that the ascendancy of Occidental thought and reason was something that was also postulated by Hegel in his philosophy of history. While Mehta disagrees with Hegelian philosophy, he believes that, unbeknownst to himself, Hegel said something profoundly true when he predicted that “it is the necessary fate of Asiatic empires to be subjected to Europeans; and China will, someday or other, be obliged to submit to this fate” (Hegel quoted in Mehta 1992, 179).

Having previously described India as “the character of Spirit in a state of Dream,” Hegel argued that the task of spirit was to awaken from this dreamy state in order to arrive at absolute self-consciousness (Mehta 1992, 178). This spirit, having fully awoken in the West, has now conquered the world (ibid, 179). It has done so through the power
of reason, which seeks to gain mastery over the world (and that which is other) via a process of understanding that works through “objectification, abstraction and conceptualization” (Mehta 1985, 118-119). As Mehta adds, not without a tinge of irony, “Is it not indeed the privilege of the spirit in the waking state, as represented by the modern Hegelian-speaking Western consciousness, to be master of its dreams, even if they be only his dreams?” (1992, 178-179).

The mastery or world conquest of which Mehta speaks should not be understood in a political or cultural sense, but in the sense of what Husserl, and following him, Heidegger called the “Europeanization of the Earth” (Mehta 1992, 179). Mehta admits that Heidegger’s thesis seems to confirm Hegel’s triumphant claim about the ultimate destiny of the West and Western reason (1970, 312), but is quick to draw an important distinction. Unlike Hegel and the thinkers who, even as they critiqued his approach ended up reproducing its main presuppositions (Hocking, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl), Mehta does not perceive the same European triumphalism or optimism on display in Heidegger’s thesis. To be sure, Mehta acknowledges Heidegger’s controversial claims that philosophy is an essentially Western European phenomenon, that the very phrase “Western philosophy” is a tautology “because philosophy is in essence Greek” (Mehta 1992, 89), and that conversely Indian (and Chinese) thought is not “philosophy” because this term should only be reserved for that mode of thought which is uniquely Greek (Mehta 1985, 234).

If Heidegger’s comments appear to glorify the achievements of the West, on Mehta’s account this is only seemingly so. When Heidegger speaks of the complete “Europeanization of the Earth and of mankind” he sees the dominance a type of
representational, objectifying and calculative mode of thinking. Peering back into the
genesis of Western metaphysical thought whose outward manifestations “we cheerfully
call progress,” Heidegger glimpsed its darker aspects (Mehta 1985, 81). As Mehta
explains, for Heidegger, “accompanying ‘progress’ as its chill and deadening shadow is
the spiritual night falling on mankind, ‘the darkening of the world, the flight of the Gods,
the depredation of the earth’” (Heidegger quoted in Mehta 1985, 81). Heidegger saw
this shadow creeping over the world in the form of technological thinking, “attacking at
its source everything that is of an essential nature” and, like a spreading desert,
“threatening to bring about a drying up of these sources” (Mehta 1992, 180, 256).

Given the all-consuming and irreversible nature of this process, Mehta asks what
options are available to “the thinking Indian [who] faces a challenge to which he was
never exposed before: the compulsion to belong, irretrievably and inescapably, to this
‘one world’ of the Ge-SteIl, to a world [made] ‘one’ only in the desolation of being
enveloped within the Nihilistic, metaphysical heritage of the West” (1992, 91).
Elsewhere Mehta (1990) depicts this challenge as the conflict between tradition and
modernity and suggests that the only way open to those in the non-West is “to go along
with this Europeanization and to go through it.” Only in this way, Mehta argues, could
India win back its own self-hood (1992, 92).

As Mehta insists, the challenge faced by India (and others in the non-West)
demands a twofold response: both a reaching out into the “alien, the foreign and the
unhomelike” and a profound rethinking of the Indian tradition. It is precisely here, Mehta
argues, that Heidegger’s insights can offer helpful guidance to the Indian thinker and
provide a powerful stimulus for such rethinking. Paraphrasing Heidegger, Mehta argues
that “the appropriation of what is our very own occurs only as a homecoming, as a return from a journey into the alien and the other” (1992, 97). As Mehta saw it, Heidegger’s work could promote just such a homecoming.

But what exactly does this mean? What precisely is the relevance of Heidegger for the Indian thinker (and for those rooted in other traditions) beyond his warning them against the hasty and thoughtless adoption of Western philosophical concepts (Mehta 1990, 24)? Mehta locates this relevance in the particular way in which Heidegger attempted to overcome metaphysics. To do so, Mehta explains, Heidegger had to take a step back, as it were, and “search for the soil that nourishes the roots of the tree of philosophy,” that is, he had to climb back to the source from which the Western tradition of metaphysical thought had sprung (1990, 53). Once there, he found in this source the unthought or forgotten foundations of Western philosophy, which allowed him to leap into a region that is “above the opposition of East and West, beyond the clash of traditions and the conflict of religions” (Mehta 1992, 89). This region is the realm of what Heidegger called the Ereignis, a realm inaccessible to representational or conceptual thinking (Mehta 1992, 90). As Mehta explains, this realm is

[T]he realm of that universality and simplicity of primordial truth, the happening of alethia, of overtness, in the belongingness of man and Being in the Self-same, where alone divergent traditions, disfranchised of their exclusive claims and yet without losing their own identity, can meet together as one, as belonging together in the Self-same. If there is any hope of an ultimate unity of divergent philosophies and religions, it lies not in the throwing of dubious bridges across them, not in questionable syntheses and compromises, but solely, through a going back of each to its own origins, in the leap into this swaying region, vibrant with the possibility of giving voice to its primordial word in a multiplicity of tongues (1992, 90; emphasis mine).

Mehta brings into sharper relief the novelty of Heidegger’s approach by contrasting it to that of Hegel. While both Hegel and Heidegger recognized that
philosophical thinking requires and involves a dialogue with “the entire heritage of what has been thought before,” Hegel’s approach focused on the dialectical transcending or surpassing of the thought of his predecessors into a higher unity. As we already saw, for Hegel “the originary, the primitive, what stands at the beginning is less developed, to be overcome by the more developed and the richer” (Mohanty1990, vii). Heidegger, by contrast, rejected such an interpretive stance. If Hegel saw the power of past thinkers in what had been thought by them, for Heidegger this power lies not in what has been previously thought but rather “in what still remains unthought and from which what has been thought receives its essential character and scope” (Mehta 1970, 308). As Mehta elaborates, according to Heidegger “the real ‘teaching’ of a thinker is the unsaid in what he says” (ibid). On Mehta’s account, this is precisely the criterion that Heidegger used when he inquired into the genesis of Western philosophy and metaphysics (ibid).

In his earlier writings Heidegger described the interpretive process of “stepping back,” of bringing out the unthought or unsaid in the work of past thinkers in terms of the methodological principle of “repetition” (ibid, 309). Repetition, on this view, involves “the reopening of a basic philosophical problem where a particular formulation and a correspondingly specific answer has been given to it,” and repeating the problem so as to reveal in it “possibilities which have not yet been actualized” (ibid, 309). Heidegger argued that what is actually thought at any particular stage in the “historical unfoldment

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11 For Heidegger, Hegel’s error was to suggest that “philosophical thought is at its poorest…in its historical beginning” (Mehta 1970, 309). Heidegger argued that the opposite is true: “the beginning is the uncanniest and mightiest” (ibid).

12 The following quotation by Heidegger offers a clear account of the difference in approach between the two thinkers: “The criterion of the unthought does not lead to the incorporation of what has been thought previously into still higher levels of development and systematization surpassing it, but demands that the heritage of thought be liberated in respect of what still lies in reserve in its ‘has been’. It is this which originally holds sway over tradition as being prior to it, thought without being thought about expressly and as the originative source” (Heidegger quoted in Mehta 1970, 308-309).
of thought” does not exhaust its potentiality or possibilities (ibid, 309). Repetition, therefore, aims to “retrace [the] path taken by thought back to its source in the possible” so as to liberate the possible “from its confinement within this actual trajectory” and to ask “if the possible offers other ways in which it may be realized in thought” (ibid, 310).

Heidegger’s distinctive approach appeals to Mehta because in it he discerns an attempt on Heidegger’s part to make explicit “the particularistic, historically rooted presuppositions in which [western thought] has been based and thus at dispelling the illusion of its apparent universality and necessity.” As Mehta elaborates, Heidegger’s attempted overcoming of metaphysics revealed that “philosophical thinking itself…is a specific, historically conditioned mode of thinking about man, world and Being, Greek in origin and proper to the West, and not just thinking simpliciter about these ultimates” (1992, 193). For Mehta, Heidegger’s work represents both a critique of the Western philosophical tradition – a tradition which for so long has remained oblivious to its own particularism – and an attempt “to develop a way of thinking for which that tradition will provide a liberative rather than a restrictive basis for future planetary thought” (1992, 193). Mehta also argues that Heidegger’s critique of the Western tradition is valuable not only because it enables Indian thinkers to see this tradition in its otherness, but also because it “liberat[es] us from the Hegelian notion that Indian thought is only ‘a first sketch’[…] of the Western mode of thought and a failure in the same kind of undertaking” (1970, 315). As such, Mehta’s Heidegger is a Heidegger who reveals the unexhausted potential of a different West, a West not characterized by a penchant for mastery and domination. For Mehta, Heidegger’s departure from the Hegelian approach

13 Contrast this to Hegel, who argued that “potentiality…actualizes itself only by totally comprehending and swallowing the other.”
opens the possibility for a new kind of hermeneutical understanding, “a hermeneutics that lets-be, a hermeneutics that does not turn the past, or the other, into a dream-image, an unreality, by the adoption of the Aufhebung principle of Hegel, but lets them be, real and speaking in their own right” (1992, 185). According to Mehta, it is just such a hermeneutics that can clear the way for a genuine dialogue between East and West.

**Mehta on the promise and limitations of comparative philosophy.** If up to this point we have been concerned with elucidating Mehta’s reading of Heidegger, it is now time to turn to Mehta’s vision of cross-cultural understanding and his thoughts on the enterprise of comparative philosophy. We have already seen that Mehta rejects the Hegelian mode of dialectical understanding, which for him is synonymous with mastery and domination. Instead, following Heidegger (and Gadamer), he favors a hermeneutics that renounces “the will to interpret” the other, a hermeneutics that lets the other be. Mehta also accepts the two German thinkers’ claims that all philosophical thought is rooted in a cultural matrix, “that human reflection on the basic problems of life and experience, the very fabric of experience itself, is always embedded in a context of tradition,” and that this gives philosophical thought a “factual and historical dimension” which calls for understanding and interpretation (1992, 194).

Mehta agrees with Heidegger and Gadamer that there is no such thing as presuppositionless understanding (1992, 203). He also follows them in arguing that “understanding is an intrinsic constituent of man’s being-in-the-world” and that as such, it is more than simply a method of knowing; it is a mode of being (1992, 201). Like the two German thinkers, Mehta similarly argues that the basic movement of understanding
requires a continuous back and forth movement, a reaching out to the other and a
return to oneself:

The attempt to understand the other...brings me up against another total
cultural horizon, which I seek to enter on the basis of my own historically
consstituted horizon. Whether it is the forgotten past of my own traditional
heritage or the otherness of a different religious tradition, in each case I am
thrown back upon myself, to a reexamination of my own preconceptions, to
an awareness of my own prejudices and their restrictive influence on my
thinking. This to and from movement between myself and the other,
between my present and the heritage of my past is also part of what is
known and the “circle of understanding”, which leads to a deepening and
widening of my own self-awareness through this corrective circularity of
understanding. Thus, a certain interfusion of different horizons takes place
and otherness is overcome, to some degree, between myself and the other,
between the past and the present (1992, 268).

As this quotation makes clear, for Mehta, understanding others must always
culminate in self-understanding, “as an acting on oneself but letting the other be” (1992,
272). Understanding others, Mehta explains, should not be conceived in a technical
way, as a method or as a “series of intellectual operations performed by a subject upon
something objectively given” (1992, 186). Rather it must be “viewed and practiced as a
religious activity, not for the sake of mastery but as a form of mutuality and self-
subordination” (Mehta 1992, 269). Only if we conceive of it in these terms, Mehta
argues, will we be able to “shed the arrogance which often marks the enterprise of
understanding the other, when togetherness slides into an objectification of the other,
and the other is ‘comprehended,’ held in one’s grasp, from a vantage point of superiority
and eventually mastered” (ibid). This is why for Mehta understanding is best conceived
as a pilgrimage, “a pilgrimage toward oneself, others being the tirthas, the sacred
places one passes through on one’s way to the final destination” (1992, 273).14

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14 As Mehta understands it, a pilgrimage is “the wayfaring of an individual through the limited span of his
life, of a people through history or of humankind itself into the unforeseeable future” (1992, 273).
Pilgrimage, for Mehta, can be distinguished from the detached, spectatorial mode of approaching the other characteristic of Western philosophy and some forms of comparative studies. Pilgrimage foregoes philosophy’s need to “swallow the other whole,” to transform the other into an object and take possession of it. Instead of a teleological journey, it is an Irregang, an unsettling journey during which “idols must be set up and idols must be broken, these same idols, our own, not those of others” (Mehta 1985, 206).

What Mehta suggests is that it is important to become aware of the “presuppositions and motivations” that drive our attempt to understand the other. He argues that it is important to “see and spell out, for oneself and the other” that our presuppositions and motivations are “constitutive elements of the understanding we achieve at any moment” (1992, 271). As Mehta writes, “no method, no supra-historical or transcendental point of view is available that can lift us out of this circle of understanding and of our finitude” (ibid). As such, understanding conceived as pilgrimage ultimately involves “a willingness to suffer change in one’s inmost being” (Mehta 1992, 277, 263); it must culminate in self-awareness, a willingness to look within oneself. The purpose of this pilgrimage is to give meaning to one’s life. As William Jackson (1992, 20), one of Mehta’s commentators, writes, “If one travels to colonize, manage, convert or sight-see as a tourist, one travels differently than if one goes on a pilgrimage seeking meaning.”

Mehta distinguishes this model of understanding from the type of understanding that goes on in academic work. If the former exhibits an attitude of “letting be,” in the
latter case understanding can often take on a repressive function, serving as an instrument of the will-to-power:

Scholarship, individual or institutionalized, like other forms of mastery, is inseparable from civilized living and it is best to work out our repressions in acquiring mastery over a ‘field of knowledge’ than over fellow human beings. It remains, however, a mode of sublimation, resting on repression and resistance to the universal religious command to look within oneself. It is the highest form of sublimation, perhaps, but is all the more insidious when abused as an instrument of mastery over other people. As a form of sublimation the dedication to scholarship points to the still remaining task of self-knowledge (1992, 271).

For Mehta, the question of what motivates and drives Western interest and scholarship in non-Western cultures – i.e., comparative studies – is a question that cannot and should not be evaded, though this has most commonly been its fate. As Mehta writes, “I have often wondered about this reticence […] and felt frustrated that this question of Western-Christian interest in non-Western cultures is hardly ever thematized and not more often explicitly aired” (1990, 68-69). In the context of this paper, Mehta encourages us to ask: what motivates CPT’s interest in non-Western traditions of thought?

Mehta examines the academic pursuit of cross-cultural understanding in greater detail in a number of essays that address, among other things, the question of instituting religious studies in Indian universities and, more broadly, the enterprise of comparative religion. These essays are important because they shed light on Mehta’s understanding of comparative studies and what he saw as the limits of the comparative enterprise. Although in these essays Mehta speaks from the point of view of his own culture, with a clear awareness of his embeddedness in a particular tradition, he nonetheless suggests a path towards studying others in a non-objectifying, non-dominative manner that should be heeded by both East and West.
In his essay “Problems of Inter-Cultural Understanding in University Studies of Religion,” Mehta argues that the introduction of religious studies in India has two main objectives. The first is to gain better knowledge of other religious traditions, “a knowledge that is not merely scientific but insightful and an understanding awareness of what is other” (Mehta 1985, 116). In this endeavor, Mehta cautions, the aim should be not merely to acquire more information about the other, but to “comprehend the other in its otherness, let it speak to us in its difference from us and allow it to lay hold of us in its claim to truth” (1985, 117). Mehta suggests that such an approach to what is other is somewhat foreign to the Indian tradition. He argues that historically, India has often failed to see the other as “other”: “In its understanding of both itself and the other, India has followed the way of growth through absorption and assimilation, rejecting what could not be appropriated without its own disintegration, accepting from other cultures whatever could be suitably transformed to become part of its living body” (Mehta 1985, 117).

According to Mehta, the Indian cultural tradition has retained both its identity and continuity without at any point defining itself in relation to an other, without acknowledging the other as “other,” and without really attempting to concern itself with the problem of the relationship between self and other (ibid). As Mehta writes, “the other was allowed to live, but without any effort at mutual understanding” (ibid, 117-118). Mehta argues that the same holds true both at the religious and philosophical levels. In the long history of its encounter with Christianity and Islam, Mehta insists that there was never an explicit attempt on the part of the Indian tradition to try to understand these two religions “in their difference or to let them address us in their truth” (ibid, 118). In their
approach to the other, Mehta writes, Indian scholars in effect practiced a strategy of “defense through insulation” (ibid).

Mehta contrasts India’s approach to the Western attitude towards the other, which for him is best exemplified by Hegel, and concludes: “If the Orient has followed the path of pre-conceptual absorption and insulation, the Occident has also, until recently, treated the other merely as its own negation, without caring to determine it in itself or seeking to understand it from within” (1985, 121). He suggests that only a clear understanding of the different ways in which both East and West approach the other can lead each towards an appreciation of the religious tradition of the other (ibid, 119). As he writes, India “cannot take the first step towards an understanding of other religious traditions unless [it] first notice[s] and acknowledge[s]…this more basic difference at the root of the cultural traditions of East and West” (Mehta 1985, 117). If up to this point Indian scholars have focused on discovering points of similarity between their own cultural traditions and those of others, Mehta insists that in the current context of “world-civilization” it is time for India to open itself up to the differences, “to turn the monologue of the past into a real dialogue” (1985, 122). For Mehta, a true dialogue is “less a telling each other than a questioning of each other and it never leaves us where we were before, either in respect to our understanding of the other or of ourselves” (ibid). 15

A related and equally important task in the enterprise of studying the other is the goal of increased self-understanding, that is, an enhanced understanding of one’s own cultural tradition. Following Gadamer, Mehta argues that for such self-understanding to

15 Mehta does not spare from criticism either the Indian or the Western tradition. He was well aware, for example, that not all Indian thought was non-objectifying (Mohanty 1990, ix).
occur the encounter between self and other must have the structure of mutual questioning, presupposing a continuous to and fro movement, a “mutual openness” towards the other and “an acknowledgement of the other as question worthy, not its dismissal as questionable” (1985, 129). For Mehta, it is “only through the reaching out to the other in active understanding,” rather than through cultural and conceptual conquest, that we can ever hope to attain the goal of building a world-community (ibid).

As we have already seen, Mehta views self-understanding as inseparable from the act of understanding the other. As he argues, “only after this return movement to ourselves can we…go on to the task of constructing a broad enough frame of reference for all religions [and traditions of thought], in terms of which we can comprehend their variety” (1985, 116). While Mehta addresses these remarks to his Indian colleagues, they hold lessons for the West as well. They suggest that the enterprise of studying the other as expressed in the projects of comparative philosophy, comparative religion, and other comparative disciplines must always aim towards an enhanced self-understanding of one’s own tradition. This is something that presently existing CPT scholarship has so far neglected to bring to the forefront. Doing so would go some ways towards answering the charges of those critics who insist that CPT needs to be more explicit about its motivations for studying non-Western traditions of thought.

Because Mehta embraces the hermeneutic approach to understanding the other, including its emphasis on the embeddedness of thought in a particular tradition, Mehta is critical of those approaches that posit the existence of a “supra-historical or transcendental point of view” from which one can pass judgment on other cultures and ways of thought. As the previous section made clear, the positing of a neutral point of
view is a hallmark of the comparative enterprise. It would seem, then, that the type of hermeneutic approach Mehta advocates is ultimately incompatible with the comparative project. Does this mean, then, that Mehta condemns comparison as a viable approach to cross-cultural understanding? The answer is both yes and no.

At the time he wrote, comparative philosophy (along with other comparative studies) was still a new academic enterprise. Like some contemporary sympathetic critics of CPT, Mehta argued that the enterprise of comparative philosophy was characterized by an absence of “a clear awareness of its problems and objectives” (1970, 303). In one of his early essays, Mehta identified a limitation in comparative philosophy as it was practiced at the time. With regards to the Western and Indian traditions, he argued that comparative philosophy was predominantly occupied with “the task of examining how certain allegedly ‘eternal’ problems are dealt with in these two traditions” (1970, 303). Mehta opposed the practice of comparative philosophy as characterized by the quest for uncovering the existence of certain perennial concerns, “everywhere and at all times the same” (1985, 221). That is, he rejected the idea that regardless of time, context, and place everyone comes up with the same questions. Instead he argued that philosophy is not only time and context bound, but that it is also culture-bound, and that this called for a different approach to comparative analysis. Because these questions exist as “parts of a total and implicit complex, hidden under the answers” they need to be brought to the surface by an explicit act of interpretation (1970, 304). That is why instead of starting out by searching for similarities between different traditions of thought, Mehta suggests that the central task of comparative philosophy should be formulated in terms of “understanding” and “interpretation” (1970,
Mehta urges comparativist scholars to focus on the differences rather than on what the self and other already share. As he writes in a different essay,

>The task of thinking in the comparative sphere is not limited to the search for what is common to the thought-content … of two different philosophical traditions, or the construction of new concepts overarching them, nor to the quest of motifs in another tradition that may supplement a deficiency in one’s own and so ‘enrich’ it. Perhaps there is, beyond this, the more exciting, in the end even more rewarding, task of trying to see and lay open the hidden truth of the paths taken by thinking (the movement of thinking, the questions asked) in each, and letting questions arise in the process and stay with us, without seeking to come up with precipitate answers. This involves a movement of thought that is less like an arrow in flight toward its target than roving and a rambling, a movement to and fro, between two different realms of discourse and vision, an exploration of two different topologies. There are no predetermined rules for a game of this kind, only the playing of the game can generate the rules, if at all. (Mehta 1985, 221-222)

Given our earlier discussion, it should be clear that the type of movement Mehta refers to in this passage is the movement of hermeneutic understanding – going out of oneself, encountering the other in all its otherness, and the return to self.

Mehta identifies another weakness of comparative studies. As practiced by his contemporaries, Mehta finds that “Comparative philosophy has so far proceeded largely on the basis of an uncritical employment of…‘metaphysical’ concepts, assumed as obviously and eternally valid, in the understanding of ‘philosophies’ such as those of India” (1985, 241). Mehta argues that extreme caution is necessary in every kind of “comparative” philosophizing and in the employment of Western metaphysical terms to express ideas rooted in another linguistic soil. Emphasizing the embeddedness of all thought in a particular cultural and historical matrix, Mehta insists that Eastern thought must be seen in its historical context. This context cannot be disregarded. Furthermore, he suggests that we cannot assume that the terminology we use does not carry with it certain assumptions and presuppositions. If we simply translate Eastern thinking into
the language of Western metaphysics, taken as the universally valid paradigm, we will just perpetuate Western “philosophy.”

Mehta argues that something remarkable is likely to happen if we “take seriously Heidegger’s talk of ‘the end of philosophy’ and his ‘overcoming of metaphysics’” (1985, 241). Heidegger’s thinking promises to bring “freedom from this metaphysical bias, the loosening of the hold of the ‘concept’ on thinking, the liberation from prejudices functioning as norms and as standards of comparison, the openness to ‘the matter of thinking’, wherever going on, East or West” (Mehta 1985, 241-242). As we already saw, from Heidegger’s perspective the end of metaphysical thinking does not mean the termination of philosophy, but rather its consummation, the fact that it has reached its fulfillment in “the world civilization based upon Western European thinking” (ibid, 243). For Mehta the question that we must address is this: are we to think of comparative philosophy as a “continuation of this consummation,” as a contribution to this world-civilization and in service to it? Or is there another possibility?

Like Panikkar, Mehta points to the apparent inconsistency in the concept of “comparative philosophy,” but adds a different spin to the problem. Following Heidegger’s understanding of philosophy as a peculiarly European phenomenon, Mehta asks: “If philosophy is a synonym for the mode of thinking arising from the Greek venture and if there is no such thing as Indian or Chinese philosophy, as Heidegger insists, what happens to the concept of ‘comparative philosophy’ itself?” (1985, 242) If the term philosophy is understood in this strict sense, as something that is specific to Europe but does not exist in the East, then, strictly speaking there would be nothing to compare. The term itself proves to be self-contradictory. In this situation, Mehta writes,
“if we still insist on comparing, it can only be for the sake of judging the non-Western, in the manner of Hegel, with the Greek-Western as the norm” (ibid). Mehta clearly rejects this approach. In its stead, he proposed that we follow Heidegger’s insights and re-imagine comparative philosophy in terms of the “task of thinking,” namely, the task of bringing into view what remains unthought in what has already been realized in thought:

Comparative philosophy, if we still retain the name, would then be the name for the task, infinitely open, of setting free, bringing into view and articulating it in contemporary ways of speaking, in new ways of speaking, the matter of thinking which, in what has actually been realized in thought, still remains unsaid and unthought, in the traditions of the East. Otherwise, comparative philosophy will amount to no more than an unthinking attempt at perpetuating Western philosophy by translating eastern thinking into the language of Western metaphysics, taken as the universally valid paradigm. And this is bad not because it is Western but because it hides an unthought opacity that stands in the way of adequately reaching out to the other, for it either prompts to an assimilation of the other or leads to a perpetuation of its otherness (1985, 242).

We can now better understand Mehta’s claim that Heidegger’s thinking has value and brings hope for those in the East “by making them see that, though in one sense…they are inextricably involved in Western metaphysical history in the form of ‘world-civilization’ (as Heidegger called it), in another sense they are now free to think for themselves, in their own fashion” (Mehta 1990, 31). Returning to our earlier question, we also see that while Mehta was critical of some of the prevailing approaches to comparative philosophy, he does not condemn comparison as such. Rather, like Panikkar, he suggests a reformulated understanding of comparative philosophy and the comparative enterprise. But whereas Panikkar emphasizes learning from the other, Mehta places greater emphasis on the critical self-understanding that results from the intercultural dialogue and exchange.
Wilhelm Halbfass and the Openness of the Comparative Project

As was the case with the previous two thinkers, the work of German Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass (1940-2000) emerges as an important source of inspiration for CPT (see Dallmayr 1996; 2004). Halbfass was Professor of Indian Philosophy in the departments of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and South Asia Regional Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, whose faculty he joined in 1973. He received a doctoral degree in Indian philosophy from the University of Goettingen, and was drawn to Eastern philosophy while studying Western cultures. Halbfass has been described both as a leading Indologist of his generation and a philosopher. He is famous for retrieving and situating the work of Sankara, the Vaisesika school, and for engaging with the hermeneutics of the Mimamsa tradition. His scholarship has been enormously influential in the field of Hindu-Christian studies, even though his work is not theological.

Like Panikkar and Mehta, Halbfass was primarily concerned with issues of cross-cultural contact and dialogical understanding. Like them, his vision of understanding was similarly developed in dialogue with the work of Hegel, Heidegger and Gadamer. Speaking about Halbfass’s work, Dallmayr writes that it “illustrates and exemplifies some of the important ingredients of the emergent post-Orientalist discourse” (Dallmayr 1996, 116). On Dallmayr’s account, Halbfass’s work serves as a useful guidepost directing us towards an exit from Orientalism and Eurocentrism. Perhaps more so than Panikkar and Mehta, Halbfass devoted considerable attention in his writings to the possibility of developing a method of comparative philosophy. Like them, he similarly argued that the term comparative philosophy was ambiguous, and in his later writings became increasingly skeptical about the possibility of devising an adequate method that
would allow for a mature comparison of Indian and Western thought. As Halbfass himself puts it,

My learning process in matters of comparative philosophy has been long and tedious. It can be described as the slow erosion of an initially very strong commitment and enthusiasm. In some of my earliest lectures and publications, I tried to develop a ‘method’ for the systematic comparison of Indian and Western philosophy, or to establish ‘comparative philosophy’ itself as a special method for the historiography of philosophy. During the following decade, my enthusiasm cooled down, but did not evaporate entirely (1994b, 300).

My aim in this section is to explore the reasons behind Halbfass’s growing skepticism with regards to “the apparent openness” of the comparative project. To this end, I focus on Halbfass’s landmark study, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. As its title suggests, the book explores the intellectual encounter between India and Europe, examining the broad range of relations that marked their contact from classical antiquity to the twentieth century. Divided into two parts, the book begins by focusing on the philosophical (mis)understanding and (mis)representations of India by Europe; it explores the changing European attitudes and interest towards India; and examines the role that India played in Europe’s (and European philosophy’s) own self-understanding.

In the second part, Halbfass shifts the focus of his analysis to the Indian response, examining the ways that Indian thinkers themselves negotiated India’s self-understanding “under the complex spell of Europe” (Franco and Preisendanz 1994, ix). In short, the book is an attempt “to show how Indians and Europeans have viewed each other in these areas of encounter [religion, philosophy and science], how they have asserted and questioned themselves, what they have expected from each other, how they have articulated their own identity, and how they have dealt with the otherness of the other” (Halbfass 1988, ix). As Halbfass notes, the aim of the book is not so much to
expose or “correct” prejudices and misunderstandings between the two cultures; rather
its primary concern is with historical and hermeneutical critique (1988, xii). More
broadly, Halbfass uses the context of this historical encounter, and what he calls the
“philosophical dialogue” between India and Europe, as a basis for a discussion of the
European intellectual background of comparative philosophy.

The European Approach to Indian Thought

Halbfass describes the encounter between India and Europe as fundamentally
asymmetrical. From the earliest contacts in classical antiquity, Halbfass recounts, it has
been Europe that has taken the initiative and reached out for India. By contrast, India’s
role in the encounter has been quite different. India has neither reached out for Europe
nor searched for it, “it has not been driven by the zeal of proselytization and discovery,
and by the urge to understand and master foreign cultures”. Following Mehta, Halbfass
similarly notes that, unlike Europe which has historically defined itself in relation to an
“other,” traditional Hindu thought did not exhibit a preoccupation with the alien and the
foreign; it did not recognize the “other” as a possible alternative or a potential source of
its identity (1988, 172). As Halbfass explains, India “discovered” the West and began to
respond to it only as a result of being “sought out, explored, overrun and objectified by
it” (ibid). Its response was therefore reactive.

As Halbfass notes, India’s initial position in the encounter was that of a target, an
instrument of Western curiosity. It was an “object of European interests of political
domination, economic exploitation, religious proselytism, scientific research and
historical understanding” (Halbfass 1988, 369). At the same time, India also functioned
as “the goal and referent of Utopian projections, of searching for the identity and the
origins of Europe, of European self-questioning and self-criticism” (ibid). India, for its
part, began to exhibit a more active theoretical interest in the “other” around 1800, the period which saw the establishment of British colonial rule and the beginnings of modern Indology (Halbfass 1988, 437-438). Recall that this is also the period that saw the emergence of comparative philosophy as an academic discipline. For Halbfass, the emergence of Indology and the entrenchment of European power in India had a profound impact upon Indian attitudes towards themselves and the “other”:

The Indians began presenting themselves to the world in a new fashion. They took more distinctive initiatives to interpret their identity for the Europeans, and to defend and affirm it against them. They began to demarcate themselves against the foreign and to recognize the other in a new sense; but they also tried to comprehend and assimilate the Western ideas within the framework of their own tradition. They responded to the universalistic claims of Western thought with a universalism of their own. They opened, even exposed themselves to the West. But this very openness appeared as a confirmation and consummation of their own tradition, its potential of universality and inclusiveness (1988, 438).

Despite this interchange, Halbfass remarks that the presence of European ideas in Indian thought seems to be far more pervasive than the presence of Indian ideas in the West. “What is the meaning of this ‘Westernization’, this apparent intellectual subjugation of India by the West?,” Halbfass asks. “Is it sheer alienation, or does it conceal an underlying strength and flexibility of the Indian tradition?” (1988, 438). A few lines below, he asks: “Did [the Indians] rediscover and reinvigorate their identity in this unprecedented exposure to the other? Did they expose and reveal inherent limitations and weaknesses in the Western tradition? What did they find, what did they miss in European thought and life?” (Halbfass 1988, 438). Characteristic of his style, Halbfass refrains from providing a straightforward answer to these questions. His answers remain implicit, embedded in the long string of reflective questions that intersperse the last three chapters of India and Europe.
For Halbfass, the fact that it was the Western world that first reached out to India and provided the framework for the encounter is of fundamental significance for how we understand the “dialogue” between the two. As he argues, “modern Indian thought finds itself in a historical context created by Europe” (1988, 375). This basic fact, Halbfass maintains, has shaped modern Indian self-understanding such that “even in their rejection of, or their self-affirmation against European ideas and orientations, modern Indian thinkers are not free from such ideas” (1988, 369). They have difficulties retrieving their own voice and speaking for themselves (1988, 375). Like Mehta, Halbfass accepts Heidegger’s thesis about the Europeanization of the earth (though not without some qualifications) and argues that “explicit or implicit reference to the West, and membership in a Westernized world, is an irreversible premise of the modern Indian thought” (1988, 369). Given that in the modern planetary situation India and Europe meet in a Westernized world, under conditions shaped by Western ways of thinking, the question that arises, and as Halbfass puts it, is as follows:

Does this mean that Europe simply dominates the ‘dialogue’ with India, that it has once and for all determined its medium and conditions, and that it has thus deprived India of the possibility to speak for itself? Does it mean that the horizon of the encounter is simply a European one? (1988, 369)

Although Halbfass does not provide a definitive answer to these questions, he suggests that despite the asymmetry and power imbalance that shaped and continues to shape the encounter a dialogue between the two is still possible. Accepting as a given the unequal character of the encounter, Halbfass insists that this does not necessarily imply a permanent European intellectual domination nor does it prevent a meaningful encounter: “this does not...mean that the dialogue and debate between India and
Europe has been decided in favor of Europe, or that India has been superseded by Europe.” As Halbfass concludes, “the dialogic situation is still open” (1988, 375).

Halbfass is not entirely sure whether the Europeanization of the earth, “thisfactually inescapable ‘universality’ is the true telos of mankind” (1988, 440). As he asks, could it be that Europe itself is now left behind by the very universality it helped inaugurate? And again:

Did [Europe] help others to gain freedom and distance from their traditional foundations and limitations, while it remained committed to its own historical roots and – paradoxically – within its ‘traditional’ horizon? Is the alienation, the loss of an authentic ‘traditional’ self-understanding which Europe has inflicted upon non-European cultures, perhaps something enviable? (Halbfass 1988, 440)

Halbfass’s questions and suggested answers can be understood in the context of Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism. Said argued that the Western scholarly enterprise of Orientalism and its representations of the “other” served to objectify and deprive “others” of genuine self-understanding, ultimately contributing to their more effective political and epistemic subjugation. Halbfass disagrees with Said and seeks to complicate the Saidian understanding of the power/knowledge nexus by suggesting (and showing) that even under conditions of gross inequality the dominant party cannot completely deprive the dominated of their ability to creatively reinterpret their traditions. That is to say, unlike Said Halbfass refuses to see the Orient as the passive victim of colonialism and European intellectual domination.

Nevertheless, we must note that Halbfass’s attitude towards Europe remains ambiguous. On the one hand, Halbfass suggests that the encounter with the West has served to awaken the “dormant potential” of the self-centered and xenophobic Hindu traditionalism, and that this encounter has created the historical conditions and
opportunity “for the full actualization of the inherent universality of the Hindu tradition” (Halbfass 1988, 369-370). As Halbfass writes, Europe (European science and philosophy) has created the “global openness and the channels of communication which are the conditions of any ‘dialogue’ between East and West.” Furthermore, “[it] has provided Indian thought with the opportunity to speak to the world, to be questioned and interpreted in new ways, and to question and challenge Western science and technology themselves” (1988, 372). If we were to stop our analysis here, Halbfass’s remarks could certainly be interpreted as a celebratory paean to Europe and its unique role in pulling India out of its confinement in an ethnocentric traditionalism, thereby setting it on the path of modernity. But because Halbfass does not limit himself to these comments our initial impression must be revised. While accepting the spread and inescapability of Europeanization, Halbfass’s later comments increasingly suggest that he does not want to present this process as a proud and unambiguous achievement. In the concluding chapter of the book, Halbfass suggests that the processes of Europeanization is like the sorcerer who can no longer control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells:

In a sense, Europe itself has been ‘superseded’ and left behind by the modern Westernized world. It is certainly no longer the master and protagonist of the process of ‘Europeanization.’ The direction of this process, the meaning of progress, the significance of science and technology, have become thoroughly questionable. The doubts and questions which had already been raised by the Romantics, Schopenhauer and others and which determined their interest in India have become much more urgent. The search for alternatives now appears as a matter of life and death (1988, 440).

Halbfass discerns a paradox at the heart of the process of Europeanization. The historical unfolding of this process “has seen the Europeans as discoverers and conquerors of the non-European world; but it has also made them distrustful of
themselves. It has led them into doubts and questions concerning their fundamental goals and presuppositions, into a sense of loss and insufficiency, and to the search for alternatives and correctives” (1988, 374). As Halbfass writes, by unleashing its “universality” Europe has awakened forces that have turned against itself. “Its ‘superiority’ has become the cause of its predicament” (ibid). The result is that Europe is now beginning to turn towards those non-European traditions “which it tried to master, supersede, ‘understand’ and ‘explain’; it tries to enlist them as allies against developments initiated by itself” (Halbfass 1988, 440). A strange reversal this, a reversal whereby “the West is turning towards the East for new inspiration, or even for therapy” (ibid). Is this an attempt to restore some element of symmetry/equality to the encounter? Or is this simply a new form of domination, Orientalism in a different garb? Halbfass writes:

The teachings and methods of the past and of Eastern traditions cannot speak and function in the modern Westernized world as they did in the past or in their own traditional contexts. It does not help to invoke Eastern methods of meditation, or the cultivation of inner awareness, against objectification, instrumentalization, consumerization, if these methods are supposed to function, and be useful within, the basic constellation of the modern world, if they are supposed to be part of those developments against which they are invoked. No calculated importation and application of Eastern ways of thinking, or methods of meditation, will enable us to reverse history, or to change the basic conditions of a world which is dominated by science and technology, driven by blind rationality, and overwhelmed by mechanisms of mastery and calculation. The recent history of Indian spiritual movements in the West illustrates this simple truth: In their application within the modern Western world, the Indian methods and teachings become parts and manifestations of this world, and the constellation of science and technology (1988, 441).

Halbfass insists that we must admit that the world has become Europeanized, even as he argues that this hegemony is not the ultimate telos of mankind; that we have to “transcend ‘what is European’”; and that we have to “reach ‘beyond Occident and
Orient” (1988, 441). Rather than celebrate the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of the encounter, Halbfass wants to ask if a critique of European/Western hegemony is sufficient to restore some form of equality to the relationship between India and Europe. According to Halbfass, most efforts to remedy this Eurocentrism simply end up reinscribing and reproducing it:

The West has imposed its methods of research, its values and modes of orientation, its categories of understanding, its ‘epistemic absolutism’ upon the Indian tradition and alienated the Indians from what they really were and are. It now takes the liberty to remove such superimpositions, to release the Indians into their authentic selfhood, to restore their epistemic and axiological sovereignty. This self-abrogation of Eurocentrism is at the same time its ultimate affirmation (1991, 12).

Halbfass is wary of proposing a definitive solution to the problem of Eurocentrism. He insists that both self-questioning and the critique of Eurocentric preconceptions are necessary ingredients of any responsible study of India (and by extension of other traditions of thought) (1991, 12). At the same time, he believes that “the attempt to eliminate all Western constructs and preconceptions and to liberate the Indian tradition from all non-Indian categories of understanding would not only be impractical, but also presumptuous in its own way” (ibid). How, then, can we proceed under these conditions of asymmetry? How can we approach and begin to understand another tradition of thought given this initial inequality? Stated yet another way, how can there be a dialogue between India and Europe if the European mode of thinking has already attained planetary proportions?

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16 For Halbfass, modern Eurocentrism coincides with the Europeanization of the earth. As he writes, Eurocentrism is “no longer a particular kind of ethnocentrism, which would coexist with or might be replaced by other ‘centrisms’, or culturally and geographically bound views of the world. In the universality of its cognitive claims, it suppresses and anticipates its own rejections and opposites. For the time being, we have no choice but to accept the historical predicament of Europeanization, and to try to understand it from within, patiently, ready to ask questions without expecting immediate answers. Trying to discard of replace it would be an act of self-deception” (Halbfass 1994, 149).
In the very last chapter of *India and Europe* Halbfass returns to Mehta’s distinctive response to Heidegger’s thesis about the irreversible Europeanization of the earth. Quoting Mehta’s words, Halbfass concludes that the asymmetry between self and other has to be accepted and worked through: “there is no way open, to us in the East, but to go along with this Europeanization and to go *through* it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and the strange can we win back our own self-hood; here as elsewhere, the way to what is closest to us is the longest way back” (Mehta quoted in Halbfass 1988, 442). In a later response to one of his interlocutors, Halbfass similarly argued that “For the time being, there seems to be little choice but to continue the (admittedly asymmetrical) dialogue, the careful reading and listening, the patient work of understanding the other, but also understanding our own conditions and limits. We have to be ready for a certain amount of ‘Gelassenheit’” (1994b, 304).

Halbfass maintains that Europeans and Indians alike are caught in the grip of the forces unleashed by Europeanization. Following the lead of Heidegger and Mehta, Halbfass accepts the diagnosis that there is no escape from Europeanization. But just as for Heidegger, so also for Halbfass, the global domination of the European mode of thinking does not mean that Indian thought (non-Western thought) is superseded (*aufgehoben*) once and for all in modern Western thought. As Halbfass writes, Indian thought, “in [all] its unassimilable, non-actualizable, yet intensely meaningful distance and otherness,” is *not* obsolete; it has not been superseded (1988, 442). The very fact that it resists easy appropriation, Halbfass seems to suggest, provides the space for transcending the European, for reaching beyond Occident and Orient (1988, 441). As Halbfass writes, Indian thought “may in fact reach far beyond our current capacity of
comprehension. [It] may not be accessible to the very ideas of ‘research’ and ‘theoretical mastery’ (1988, 170). For this very reason, Halbfass continues, “we have to detach ourselves from the spell of methodic research and progress. The enigmatic future ‘dialogue’ with the East, to which Heidegger refers, cannot be planned and organized. What we may have to learn above all is ‘Gelassenheit’, a serene willingness to wait, and not to plan for this future” (ibid). The future remains open.

**Halbfass on India and the Comparative Method**

I have already shown that Halbfass devotes much time reminding his readers about the asymmetrical character of the encounter between Indian and Europe. For Halbfass this unevenness expresses itself in the ways in which Western scholar have approached Indian thought. In addition to describing the wide range of relations that marked the encounter between India and Europe, Halbfass’s book also charts the emergence and application of the so-called “comparative method” to India and the Indian tradition of thought. Similarly, he considers how the Indians themselves applied this method to their own tradition.

Halbfass reminds us that the emergence and growing popularity of the comparative disciplines in the humanities in the 19th century owes its success to the propagation of the “comparative method” in the natural sciences, and specifically the biological, anatomical and physiological sciences during the 17th and 18th centuries (1994b, 298). Halbfass recognizes that comparison is “a more or less natural ingredient in many kinds of intellectual activity” and that it finds a special place in the cross-cultural encounter, especially with regards to the possibility of thinking the relationship between identity and difference (1988, 419; also see Halbfass 1994b, 298). While comparison has been around since ancient times, it emerged as a consciously utilized method
towards the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century when it was raised to an altogether new level and given a new role: it was now understood as an “objectified procedure, a strategy of cognitive mastery” (1994b, 298). Given its origins in the natural sciences, it is easy to understand why comparison is associated with objectification and a neutral standpoint, with “the discovery of pervasive structures and general, objectifiable laws in any field to which it is applied” (ibid).

Recognizing that comparison is a more or less necessary ingredient of any understanding, Halbfass argues that as long as comparison accompanies the hermeneutic process in a “casual and subordinate fashion” we should have no cause for concern (1994b, 297). It is only when we elevate comparison “to a deliberate method” and pursue comparison “as the systematic principle and inherent goal of cross-cultural and historical understanding” that we are likely to encounter serious problems (1994b, 297). As Halbfass argues, once comparison is raised to the level of a dominant principle it becomes incompatible with the dialogic approach. The latter, which is inspired by Gadamer and which Halbfass advocates and practices, is committed to listening and speaking to the “other” and does not claim a neutral standpoint or “an objectifying distance from these processes” (Halbfass 1994b, 298). More clearly, this means that the hermeneutic emphasis on the enabling and constraining function of preconceptions (a principle which Halbfass himself accepts) precludes the possibility of a neutral, superior, or objective standpoint. This seems to suggest that the comparative approach is fundamentally at odds with dialogic approaches to cross-cultural understanding.

\footnote{As Halbfass writes elsewhere, we must “pursue the work of [cross-cultural] understanding through careful and patient reading and listening” (1994a, 150).}
Halbfass informs us that it was Indian scholar Brajendranath Seal who first introduced the term “comparative philosophy” towards the end of the 19th century. Seal advocated a “historico-comparative method” for the systematic study of comparative philosophy and other comparative disciplines, with the aim of providing “new and comprehensive material for more correct generalizations...and for the discovery of general laws of the social organism” (Seal quoted in Halbfass 1988, 423). Aside from noting its close affiliation with Comtean positivism, Halbfass observes that Seal’s use of the comparative method had a secondary, “apologetic” function. As Halbfass argues, Seal’s use and advocacy of “historico-comparative” studies was meant to “combat Eurocentrism and the Hegelian manner of subordinating non-Western traditions to European thought” (Halbfass 1994b, 299). It was meant to defend the “dignity of the Indian tradition against the challenges of Western thought and its claims of superiority and domination” (1988, 424). As such, it served as a device for cultural self-assertion and self-affirmation. The method of historical comparison Seal proposed “implies that the objects compared are of co-ordinate rank” (Seal quoted in Halbfass 1988, 423). In other words, Seal sought to combat the Hegelian scheme of subordinating non-Western traditions to European thought by replacing subordination with coordination, which places the objects compared (i.e., the different philosophical traditions) on an equal level. Here we arrive once again to one of the fundamental premises of comparison, namely, that it assumes and requires a level playing field.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{18}\) For more or less the same account, see Halbfass’s *On Being and What There Is*, Ch. 1, especially pp. 13-14.
Halbfass argues that this positivistic affiliation and apologetic motivation is still very much on display in the field of “comparative philosophy.” As he comments, one of the main goals of comparative philosophy is still the attempt “to rectify and balance the Eurocentric perspective and to replace subordination with coordination” (1994b, 299). Interestingly, what remains largely overlooked is the “affiliation of such coordination with positivism (and, at least indirectly, with anthropocentrism and Europeanization)” (ibid). Like Panikkar and Mehta, Halbfass is critical of the positivist orientation of comparative philosophy and questions the alleged neutrality and objectivity of its approach. Although this method is frequently associated with an anti-Hegelian stance, Halbfass insists that “its freedom from Hegelian premises and its intercultural neutrality and universality should not be taken for granted” (1992, 14). While Halbfass does not completely reject the enterprise of comparative philosophy, and appears to hold open the possibility that it may yet produce a “story of success,” he does find problematic the discrepancy between comparative philosophy’s pretensions and its actual results (1994b, 300).

Like Panikkar and Mehta, Halbfass similarly pointed to the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the term “comparative philosophy.” Like Mehta, Halbfass stressed the importance of self-understanding in any enterprise geared towards cross-cultural dialogue. Like Panikkar, he seems to urge comparative philosophy to take into account its own distinctive standpoint, to include it and make it part of its analysis, and not to shy away from self-critique. In his early work, Halbfass also suggested that what comparative philosophy needs is “courage, modesty, and patience; not the accumulation of more and more juxtaposable data, not the rash jumping to conclusions
concerning ‘essential’ differences and ‘ultimate’ identities.” It needs the courage and patience to develop its own distinctive hermeneutics (1994b, 300).

Halbfass questioned the alleged openness of the comparative project, and insisted on reminding its practitioners that although “comparison” implies theoretical neutrality and does not associate itself with any particular tradition of philosophy, its roots and development are thoroughly grounded in the European tradition. These are some of the recurring challenges that made Halbfass abandon his initial hope of developing a method of comparative philosophy.

“Is there a truly common ground for a comparison of different traditions of thought and a neutral, universal medium through which they can communicate?” (Halbfass 1992, 14). In a later work, Halbfass suggested that more so than comparative philosophy such common ground is offered by “logical and linguistic analysis and exemplified by the methods of modern analytical philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon type” (1992, 14). As Halbfass explains, in recent years the claim has been advanced that the formal or analytical methods (and especially the use of symbolic logic) “are separated from the restrictions of the various existing languages, as well as the traditions by which they are used” and that they are hence more “conducive to a truly universal understanding of the different philosophical traditions” (ibid). According to Dallmayr (1996, 123), these comments jeopardize the exit from Orientalism and Eurocentrism which Halbfass had pursued in his earlier studies. On Dallmayr’s account, in his approach to Indian thought Halbfass’s late work shows itself to be too accommodating of the analytical approach. In Halbfass’s declaration that mere familiarization with the Indian tradition is not enough, that what needs to supplement such studies is some
degree of critical distantiation and analysis, Dallmayr discerns a palpable turn away from Halbfass’s earlier hermeneutic openness. More to the point, he expresses concern that in defending the merits of the analytical approach Halbfass has abandoned the path of hermeneutic understanding.

Dallmayr is right to suggest that Halbfass is unable to resolve the dilemma that opens up when one attempts to pursue objectivity at the same time as one is undertaking the hermeneutic task of translating and understanding an unfamiliar tradition in its own context and on its own terms. As Halbfass (1992, 15) himself writes, “in the end, we do not have a well-defined method, and perhaps not even a definite perspective, for our exploration of the Indian texts and teachings. Our procedure will be eclectic.” Dallmayr (1996, 123) interprets Halbfass’s concluding remarks as “a halfhearted eclecticism.” And yet such a conclusion is perhaps overdrawn. While Halbfass’s writings certainly exhibit skepticism towards the comparative enterprise and its penchant for objectification, his subsequent demand for some degree of objectivity in cross-cultural studies need not be understood as a renunciation of his earlier hermeneutic openness. That is to say, the simultaneous rejection of and call for some degree of objectivity should not be construed as a contradiction that needs to be resolved in favor of one side or the other.

Halbfass’s untimely death prevented him from offering more thorough reflections on this dilemma. But his reflections on the enterprise of comparative philosophy and his suggestion that scholars engaged in the study of non-Western thought should strive for some kind of objectivity point to a tension that has reemerged in CPT. Farah Godrej’s recent attempt to reframe CPT as cosmopolitan political thought, and her proposal for
an “existential understanding” constitutes one attempt to address the issue of objectivity in cross-cultural studies. I discuss the merits and limitations of her approach in the next chapter, in the context of CPT’s engagement with the critique of Orientalism and Eurocentrism.
CHAPTER 4
THE “EUROCENTRISM TRAP” AND THE EXIT FROM ORIENTALISM

The terms Orientalism, Eurocentrism, and Westcentrism are employed often and interchangeably in existing CPT scholarship to designate the epistemological traps that await students of non-Western thought, as well as to point to the project (viz., Orientalism) CPT positions itself against. In defining CPT as a subfield that seeks to move beyond Orientalism, Dallmayr and scholars who have followed in his footsteps clearly align themselves with Edward Said’s influential work on the subject. As I argued in Chapter 1, Said’s critique of Orientalism is central to some contemporary works of comparative political theory and, as Megan Thomas observes, the influence of his work is quite evident “in the way comparative political theorists often articulate concerns about Eurocentrism, essentialism, and the relationship between power and knowledge” (Thomas 2010, 654).

Despite an open acknowledgment of their indebtedness to Said’s project, comparative political theorists also have been keen to distance themselves from his

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1 Nine out of the nineteen volumes in Dallmayr’s Global Encounters series – a collection of books that features work in comparative political theory – invoke aspects of Said’s argument in Orientalism. Specifically, in these nine volumes there are at least 101 references to “Orientalism” (the book) and “Orientalism” (the practice of representing the Orient as inferior and subordinate to the West). In all of these cases Said’s critique of Orientalism is used as a reference point against which authors situate their own arguments. Taking either critical or appreciative stances towards Said’s text, many of the chapters in these volumes enlist his work for the broader goal of problematizing binary categories and distinctions that perpetuate stereotypes of the “other,” and an “us” vs. “them” mentality. See Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives (Lexington Books, 2006); Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies Under the Upas Tree (Lexington Books, 2003); Postcolonialism and Political Theory (Lexington Books, 2007); Civilizational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran Papers (Lexington Books, 2007); Border Crossing: Toward a Comparative Political Theory (Lexington Books, 1999); Remaking Turkey: Globalization, Alternative Modernities, and Democracy (Lexington Books, 2007); Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia (Lexington Books, 2008); Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity (Lexington Books, 2004); Comparative Political Culture in the Age of Globalization (Lexington Books, 2002).
work, especially from some of its theoretical and methodological shortcomings.\textsuperscript{2} Given the centrality and usefulness of \textit{Orientalism} to scholars of comparative political theory, my primary aim in this chapter is to examine the ways in which Said’s critique of Orientalism has been taken up, interpreted and used within the field of comparative political theory. In this, my goal is not to “rescue” Said from erroneous readings or to criticize comparative political theorists for reading his work “incorrectly.” Nor will it be my aim to engage in a reinterpretation of Said’s work. Rather, I seek to foreground what is at stake for CPT in aligning itself with the spirit of Edward Said’s critique.

My analysis of CPT’s relationship to Orientalism, therefore, seeks to show how the field of comparative political theory has taken its present shape and internal organization. Specifically, I demonstrate that there are two important consequences that follow from CPT’s peculiar love-hate relationship to Said’s work. First, CPT scholars have accepted Said’s negative characterization of Orientalism and, as a result, have similarly come to associate the practice with a hegemonic mode of theorizing in which the voices of the “other” are subsumed within Western categories and evaluative frameworks. Precisely because they accept Said’s account of Orientalism, CPT scholars have in turn sought to distance their own project from the Orientalist tradition

\textsuperscript{2} While it is not my purpose to enter into the voluminous secondary literature on Said’s \textit{Orientalism} and to reproduce the arguments of his critics, it is useful to mention some of the most common critiques that have been raised against the book: Said fails to provide an alternative to Orientalism; he does not explain how and by what method he manages to extricate himself from the coercive structures of knowledge that he describes; as Robert Young puts it, Said does not adequately answer the question of how any form of knowledge can escape the terms of Orientalism’s critique (Young 2004, 171). Dennis Porter (1994) points to some additional methodological problems that plague \textit{Orientalism}. He argues that in the book Said vacillates over the opposition between truth and ideology, and lacks a distinction between pure and political knowledge. Porter takes Said to task for asserting the unified character of Western discourse about the Orient over two millennia, i.e. for claiming a continuity of representations of the Orient from the time of the Alexander the Great to Jimmy Carter. Porter also critiques Said for failing to adequately historicize the texts he analyzes in the book. Finally, James Clifford (1988) has pointed out the theoretical short circuit that results between Said’s reliance on methods derived from Foucault (namely his notion of discourse) and Said’s simultaneously embrace of a humanist perspective.
that Said critiqued. Given that Said never articulated a clear alternative to the phenomenon he diagnosed, CPT scholars have sought to remedy this omission by proposing immersion and dialogue as effective “exits” from Orientalism.

As I show in this chapter, a second important consequence of CPT’s disavowal of Orientalism is that this move has prevented scholars from inquiring into the actual history of this phenomenon. Revisiting this history reveals important similarities between CPT’s own project and earlier 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century Orientalist interest in non-Western thought. Like Orientalists before them, comparative political theorists today similarly argue that the benefit of turning to the study of non-Western texts and traditions is that this can help disrupt the narrowness and parochialism of Western political thought (see Clarke 1997; Thomas 2010). Investigating the parallels between Orientalist scholarship and current attempts to open the Western canon of political theory to non-Western voices is a worthwhile endeavor for a number of reasons.

First, it puts pressure on the field of CPT to clarify what makes it different from earlier Orientalist attempts directed at expanding Western intellectual horizons. Absent such a differentiation, at the very least CPT risks repeating what Megan Thomas (2010, 655, 677) has called Orientalism’s “quiet failure,” namely, its failure to permanently transform the West’s intellectual landscape as many Orientalists thought it would. Since Thomas has already explored some of the similarities between contemporary work in CPT and the scholarship of Orientalist figures such as William Jones, C.W.F. Schlegel, and Max Müller, I will not repeat her argument here.

Second, a comparison between CPT and earlier Orientalist scholarship also suggests the need for revising, or at least revisiting, our understanding of Orientalism.
Specifically, I argue that their acceptance of Said’s negative characterization of Orientalism has prevented CPT scholars from recognizing that “Orientalism” had multiple guises and manifestations, and contained both imperialist and anti-imperialist impulses and motivations. As J.J. Clarke remarks in his study on the subject, in addition to being associated with colonialism, in the Western context Orientalism also assumed the role of gadfly; it represented a “counter-movement, a subversive entelechy…[that] has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power” (Clarke 1997, 9, 27). Taking this into account, I suggest that CPT’s wholesale rejection of Orientalism places a question mark over the field’s entire identity, an identity that has been explicitly forged in opposition to a reductive conceptualization of Orientalism. Going a step further, and invoking the words of Halbfass, I argue that any such rejection of Orientalism “is futile as long as it is unable to face the extent to which it is permeated by what it rejects” (Halbfass 1994, 149).

Having provided a broad outline of my argument, the chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section I examine the ways in which Fred Dallmayr and Roxanne Euben have taken up Said’s critique of Orientalism. In the second section I extend my analysis to include the work of Farah Godrej and Leigh Jenco, and place their work into conversation with Heidegger’s notion of the “Europeanization of the Earth.” The third and final section elaborates on the implications for CPT of rejecting Orientalism.

The Discourse of Said: Comparative Political Theory and the Critique of Orientalism

In the universality of the Western ratio, there is this division which is the Orient: the Orient, thought of as the origin, dreamt of as the vertiginous point from which nostalgia and promises of return are born, the Orient offered to the colonizing reason of the Occident, but indefinitely inaccessible, for it always remains the limit: the night of the beginning, in which the Occident was formed, but in which it traced a dividing line, the
Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not, while remaining the place in which its primitive truth must be sought. What is required is a history of this great divide, all along this Occidental becoming, following it in its continuity and its exchanges, while also allowing it to appear in its tragic hieratism (Foucault 2009, xxx).

The above epigraph from Michel Foucault’s 1961 preface to *History of Madness* captures well some of the key motifs that make up Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism. As one of Said’s most penetrating and yet sympathetic critics observes, it is important to note that Said never defines Orientalism but “qualifies and designates it from a variety of distinct and not always compatible standpoints” (Clifford 1988, 259). Broadly understood, the term Orientalism describes the “various disciplines, institutions, processes of investigation and styles of thought by which Europeans came to ‘know’ the ‘Orient’…and which reached their height during the rise and consolidation of nineteenth century imperialism” (Aschroft and Ahluwalia 1999, 57). More specifically, in the introduction to his *Orientalism*, Said presents three different, but in his view also interrelated, meanings of the term. In its narrow sense, Said explains, the term refers to the academic discipline of Orientalism: “anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient…either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (Said 2003, 2).

Said also used the term in a second sense, writing that “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between ‘the Orient’ and…‘the Occident’” (ibid). This distinction rests upon the construction of the Self (the Occident) in opposition to a negatively valued, inferior, exotic, and threatening Other (the Orient). As Foucault articulated this distinction, “the Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not” (Foucault 2009, xxx). In psychological terms, the Orient appears
in the Western unconscious as “the unfathomable, the nocturnal figure of the mind, the presence of the chaos that the West had warded off” (Schwab 1984, 484).

Finally, in its third sense, Said used the term to denote “the corporate institution [erected in the West] for dealing with the Orient…by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, selling it, ruling over it.” In short, Said argued, Orientalism is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (2003, 3). Apart from describing Orientalism as a discourse and a system of knowledge about the Orient, Said also associated Orientalism with a “certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different…world” (ibid, 12). The core of Said’s argument about this mode of “knowing” the Orient resides in the link he drew, following Foucault, between knowledge and power.³

In Said’s analysis, Orientalism emerges not simply as a field of study that takes as its objects Oriental peoples, histories, religions, languages, and literatures. It is a broader discourse, a colonizing knowledge, that generates stereotypical dichotomies between a rational, democratic, creative, dynamic, and masculine “Occident” and an irrational, despotic, imitative, passive, and feminine “Orient.” Orientalism, Said argues, takes a particular approach to its subject matter, one characterized by chauvinism and racism,⁴ an approach that disregards, essentializes, and denudes the humanity of

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³ In the first and third definitions of “Orientalism,” we may note that Orientalism is concerned with something called to “Orient.” Throughout the book, Said often refers to an entity that he calls the “real” or “authentic” Orient. By contrast, we note that in its second meaning the “Orient” exists as a mental construct. As a number of critics have pointed out, this ambivalence between a “real” and “imagined” Orient informs much of Said’s argument.

⁴ As Said polemically declares, during the 19th century “Every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was…a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric” (2003, 204). However, it is important to recognize that for Said, “Orientalism is not a matter of some civilizational taint or genetic prejudice from
another culture, people, or geographical region (2003, 108). Orientalism, for Said, must therefore be understood as all of these things simultaneously. In Meghan Thomas’s words, “it is the interconnections between epistemological, political, and aesthetic forms of oppression” (2012, 27).

On the material plane, Said implicates Orientalism in colonialism (and vice versa), arguing that Orientalism served the interests of European empires by providing an integrated discourse, a system of representations, “that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and...Western empire” (2003, 203). In this context, the Orientalist scholar emerges as “an accomplice, a partner-in-crime, of the politician, merchant, soldier, missionary and colonial administrator” (Oldmeadow 2004, 8). More than just a mere intellectual tradition, Said argued that Orientalism is “a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture.” As such, it “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (2003, 12). In fact, as James Clifford (1988, 271-272) suggests, the effect of Said’s argument in Orientalism, which is sometimes missed by his critics, is not so much to undermine the notion of an essentialized Orient, but to problematize the so-called Occident.

One of the central theoretical issues that Said raises in Orientalism, an issue that is of central concern to comparative political theorists today, has to do with the status of all forms of knowledge and representation of otherness. Is there a non-dominative form

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5 For example, Said writes that Orientalism, in addition to being an academic tradition was also “an area of concern defined by travelers, commercial enterprises, governments, military expeditions, readers of novels and accounts of exotic adventure, natural historians, and pilgrims to whom the Orient is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, peoples, and civilizations” (2003, 203).
of knowledge that allows us to comprehend and respect the other? More to the point, "How does one represent other cultures?" (2003, 325). Said believed that the most important task of all is "to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative, perspective." But such a task would require an enormous undertaking. As Said recognizes, finding an answer to these questions would mean that "one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power" (2003, 24). Said frankly admits that such an undertaking is beyond the scope of his study. He also quite openly acknowledges that alternatives to Orientalism are not his subject: "My project has been to describe a particular system of ideas, not by any means to displace the system with a new one" (2003, 325). He did, however, make gestures towards ways in which we can study and approach other cultures without reproducing relations of domination. For example, he argued for the need for greater self-reflexivity and the necessity of submitting one’s own critical method to critical scrutiny (2003, 327).

Elsewhere he explicitly posits the following two conditions as necessary for knowing another culture: (1) “uncoercive contact with an alien culture through real exchange;” and (2) “Self-consciousness about the interpretive process itself” (Said 1981, 142). He concluded that since all knowledge is interpretation, “interpretation must be self conscious in its methods and its aims if it is to be vigilant and humane” (1981, 164). With regards to study of other cultures, he added that underlying every interpretation of a foreign culture is a choice that every scholar must confront: “whether to put intellect at the service of power or at the service of criticism, community, and moral sense” (Said 1981, 164). Said was deeply concerned about the role of the
intellectual and cautioned against too close a relationship between the scholar and the state: “What is the role of the intellectual? Is he there to validate the culture and state of which he is a part? What importance must he give to an independent critical consciousness, an oppositional critical consciousness?” (Said 2003, 326).

In his later writings, Said persistently reminded his readers that there was no such thing as neutral, objective, or non-political scholarship. He worried that contemporary criticism had folded back upon itself, that scholars and intellectuals today consistently refuse to acknowledge their affiliation with the political world. “Once an intellectual, the modern critic has become a cleric in the worst sense of the word,” Said wrote (1983, 292). To this mode of “religious” criticism, which he associated with a blind, dogmatic reproduction of inherited modes of thought, he opposed what he called “secular” (humanistic) criticism – an oppositional critical consciousness that is sensitive to human experience, the details of everyday existence and the organization of power (ibid, 27). As Said suggested, it is only this kind of criticism that can point us in a direction away from the pitfalls of Orientalist, colonizing knowledge; away from the false universality of the Western ratio. In the end, however, Said never provided a clear alternative to Orientalism. He spoke about the possibility of “genuine interpretation,” “genuine encounters,” and “real exchange” with foreign peoples, histories and cultures, but he never specified how this could be done except in the vaguest terms. It is precisely into the space left open by Said that comparative political theorists have stepped in.

Before proceeding to my examination of the ways in which several influential CPT scholars have taken up Said’s critique of Orientalism, one final observation is in
order. As Harry Oldmeadow points out, from the 18th to the mid-20th century the term “Orientalism” was a more or less neutral descriptive term. It referred to an “ongoing Western tradition of intellectual inquiry into and existential engagement with the ideas of, practices and values of the East, particularly in the religious field” (Oldmeadow 2004, 7). It is only with the publication and remarkable success of Said’s Orientalism that the term became ideologically charged and acquired its predominantly pejorative meaning with which it is associated today. As I demonstrate below, when comparative political theorists speak about Orientalism, following Said’s lead, they understand the term in its pejorative meaning.

**Fred Dallmayr Reads Said**

Fred Dallmayr’s Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter (1996) represents one of his first full-length forays into non-Western thought. As such, it is also an exemplar of the new mode of comparative inquiry Dallmayr has sought to introduce within the broader field of political theory. In addition to dedicating the book to Edward Said and Hans Georg-Gadamer, the influence of Said’s work is quite evident in the range of themes and questions Dallmayr explores in this collection of essays – the relationship between self and other in the context of deepening globalization, Western encounters with non-Western modes of thought, and the possibility of understanding and gaining knowledge of the other without distorting and remaking the other in one’s own image. In this early work of comparative political theory we can already identify

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6 This is not to say that Said is singlehandedly responsible for permanently overturning the meaning of Orientalism. As Said himself acknowledged, his study of the relationship between colonialism and Western knowledge production was already foreshadowed in the critical work of Egyptian sociologist Anwar Abdel Malek (“Orientalism in Crisis,” 1963), Palestinian historian A. L. Tibawi (“English Speaking Orientalists: A Critique of Their Approach to Islam and Arab Nationalism,” 1963), Dutch scholar Jacques Waardenburg (L’Islam Dans le Mirroir de l’Occident, 1963), and French scholar Raymond Schwab (The Oriental Renaissance, 1950).
both the central thematic concerns of the fledgling field – an attempt to take up the
questions bequeathed to us by Said – and a proposal for a way out of the impasses of
Orientalism and Eurocentrism that effectively anchors the project of CPT to the larger
philosophical enterprise expressed in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and
Heidegger’s overcoming of metaphysics.

From the very outset, Dallmayr alerts readers to his indebtedness to Said’s work.
The central task of the book, Dallmayr explains, is “to venture some steps beyond
Eurocentric arrogance and hence ‘beyond Orientalism’” as well as to “move beyond
Samuel Huntington’s vision of a looming ‘clash of civilizations’” (1996, xi). As Dallmayr
acknowledges, “[i]n the attempt to transgress ‘Orientalism,’ I am strongly and lastingly
indebted to Edward Said whose book of the same title opened the eyes of readers to
the complicity of much traditional scholarship with European colonial expansion” (ibid).
Dallmayr accepts from Said the insight that “the end of colonial empires has not by itself
ushered in the demise of subtler forms of Western economic and military hegemony”
(ibid), and sets as his task the challenge of articulating a nonimperialistic or
nonhegemonic mode of theorizing and cross-cultural encounter. As I intimated above,
for Dallmayr the antidote to Orientalism comes in the form of Gadamer’s philosophical
hermeneutics, which accentuates the nonassimilative dialogical exchange between self
and other, reader and text, and between the present and the past (see Dallmayr 1996,
xii, 120). Since I examine Dallmayr’s turn to hermeneutics in greater detail in the next
chapter, in this section my aim is to trace the ways in which Said’s critique has been
appropriated by the founding father of CPT.
Dallmayr’s engagement with Said’s argument is somewhat ambivalent. Dallmayr repeatedly praises Said for bringing to light the “close linkage between academic learning and colonial power” (1996, xii) during the heydays of Western imperial expansion, but is quick to point out that this description no longer reflects the realities of our age. “At least occasionally or intermittently,” Dallmayr writes, “Orientalist monologue in our century has given way to an incipient dialogue making room for the participation of intellectuals and writers from the (formerly) colonized world” (1996, 63). Dallmayr follows Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Canadian professor of comparative religion, in suggesting that our age is “different in type from earlier Orientalism” (ibid). If the 19th century was a time characterized by the West’s immense but one-sided erudition about other cultures, the 20th century has given birth to a new phase, one where “those other people themselves” are not only present, but where “large-scale compilations of data are now progressively supplemented by ‘a living encounter – a large-scale face-to-face meeting among persons of diverse faith’” (W.C. Smith quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 63).

Attempting to make sense of this change, Dallmayr agrees with and approvingly cites W.C. Smith who argued that future historians may well “look back upon the twentieth century […] as the century of the coming together of peoples, when all mankind for the first time became one community” (Smith quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 63).

These observations are revealing. They point to Dallmayr’s belief that we have already successfully extricated ourselves from the confines of Orientalism and its one-sided imperialistic mode of theorizing and knowledge production. More importantly, the above comments also imply that our age is somehow more tolerant, egalitarian, and multicultural than that of our predecessors. Perhaps unwittingly, such remarks have the
added effect of constructing and reimagining the 19th century as more divided, less tolerant and more imperialist that perhaps it was. This marked differentiation of the present from the past already signals an attempt on the part of Dallmayr to distance the emerging project of CPT from earlier endeavors at cross-cultural understanding, because these were tainted by the mark of Orientalism – the misrepresentation and distortion of the thought, culture and lived experiences of the “other.” While Dallmayr wholeheartedly accepts Said’s thesis regarding the imbrications of knowledge and power during the heyday of European colonialism, he is quick to dismiss the suggestion that we may not have entirely freed ourselves from Orientalism’s grip. As he writes again and again, the “constellation of factors that formed the backdrop of Western Orientalism […] is no longer prevalent today” (Dallmayr 1996, 115). For Dallmayr, the formal demise of European colonial empires and the advent of post-colonialism (here literally understood as the period after the end formal colonialism) means that we have now entered a post-Orientalist age, an age that “endeavors to rupture or transgress the tradition Orientalist paradigm” (ibid, 115).

Dallmayr clearly anchors Said’s argument to colonialism and the imperatives of colonial domination thereby suggesting that with the demise of colonialism we should expect to see the end of Orientalism. And yet, in so far as colonial domination was underpinned by power imbalances between the West and non-West, and in so far as Dallmayr himself admits that “cross-cultural encounters today are deeply overshadowed by political and economic asymmetries shaping the respective status of West and non-West,” (1996, xvii) it would follow that Dallmayr should not be so quick to dismiss the key theoretical issue raised by Said’s Orientalism: “Can one ultimately escape
procedures of dichotomizing, restructuring, and textualizing in the making of interpretive statements about foreign cultures and traditions? If so, how?” (Clifford 1988, 261).

Dallmayr eschews grappling with this issue, and avoids posing this question of his own work. To be fair, Dallmayr does raise important questions such as “how can we or should we approach the other, especially an other belonging to a distant world, to a radically different culture?” Further down he also asks: “how can we properly gain understanding? Proceeding from our own assumptions, are we condemned to incorporate alien life-forms by assimilating them into our categories and beliefs?” (1996, 89). As I showed in the previous chapter, such questions are central the enterprise of CPT. And yet, there is a marked difference between asking questions to which one already knows the answer (as is the case with Dallmayr), and asking questions whose answer is not immediately clear to us. In the first instance, one risks absolutely nothing. In the second instance, one risks quite a bit in the sense that one’s point of view might be altered in the process of searching for an answer. As Gadamer writes, “the path of all knowledge leads through the question. To ask a question means to bring things into the open. The openness of what is in question is in the fact that the answer is not settled. It must still be determined, awaiting a decisive answer” (Gadamer 2004, 357). In the sense outlined by Gadamer, “every true question requires this openness.” Without it, it is “no more than an apparent question” (ibid). Taking this distinction into account, in Dallmayr’s approach to the issues outlined above I believe we may find an example of what Gadamer calls an “inauthentic” question.

Although Dallmayr expresses concern for the manner in which the exit from Orientalism has been sought and achieved in our own age, Dallmayr’s concern does not
lead him to revisit the substance of Said’s argument in *Orientalism*. Because for Dallmayr the answer has already been settled, his concern, which I reproduce below, appears somewhat contrived:

Clearly, the demise of Orientalism cannot be cause for lament. Still, even while welcoming new departures, one may plausibly be concerned about the manner of the demise, that is, the way in which the exit from Orientalism is sought and performed. Is it really possible to move briskly from Eurocentrism to anti-Eurocentrism (and from logos to antilogos)? Is it sensible to equate traditional learning – however flawed – simply with colonial oppression? [...] In our globalizing context, is there not still room and need for cross-cultural understanding – beyond the confines of Eurocentrism and logocentrism? And does such understanding not involve or presuppose a patient learning process, a sustained effort of reciprocal interrogation, which, in turn, can hardly disdain some of the resources (philological, historical, anthropological) of traditional scholarship? As it happens, the groundwork for such a post-Orientalist inquiry has already been laid in our time by a group of scholars from the West and non-West (1996, 116).

The questions Dallmayr poses in the above paragraph are rhetorical in nature, formulated in such a way that they already point to Dallmayr's preferred answer, namely, that the exit from Orientalism has already been achieved by a group of scholars whose work either expresses or parallels Gadamer’s project of philosophical hermeneutics. As Roxanne Euben remarks in her review of *Beyond Orientalism*, Dallmayr’s commitment to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and to dialogical exchange more broadly, unnecessarily narrows his choice of interlocutors to those thinkers who are agreeable to the hermeneutic project (Euben 2000, 404). Not only does his book not include women’s voices or Islamic voices, by default it excludes those perspectives that are less agreeable to Gadamer’s nonassimilative approach of “letting be” (Dallmayr 1996, xii). Because Dallmayr never allows himself to be challenged by the questions he

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7 Halbfass, J.L. Mehta, Panikkar, Radhakrishnan.
raises, in the end he misses the opportunity to discover and be surprised by a different answer, one that may point in a different direction from the larger philosophical enterprise associated with Heidegger and Gadamer.

It is revealing, therefore, that even the merits of Edward Said’s arguments are assessed in light of their proximity to or distance from the hermeneutical project. Dallmayr’s central critique of Orientalism centers on Said’s claim that “[Orientalism] is, rather than expresses, a certain *will or intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (Said 2003, 12; emphasis in original). Dallmayr takes issue with Said’s association of Orientalism with what he calls “a quasi-Nietzschean ‘will-to-knowledge’ or ‘will-to-power’” (Dallmayr 1996, xvi), and specifically questions Said’s assertion regarding the deep complicity of scholars (and academic forms of knowledge more generally) with colonial domination and institutions of power. As Dallmayr writes, “if interpretation of alien cultures always and necessarily proceeds from a strategic will to power, European or Western students of the East could not possibly help but ‘Orientalize’ their subject matter in an exercise of intellectual imperialism” (1996, xvi). Here Dallmayr touches on what many interpreters have perceived as an important methodological lacuna on the part of Said. Because he refused to articulate an alternative to Orientalism in his 1978 book, Said’s text easily leaves readers with more questions than it answers. If all knowledge is contaminated by power, are students trained in Western methods of scholarship invariably doomed to misrepresent and distort – that is, to Orientalize – the experience, culture, and traditions of thought of the
non-Western “other”? Dallmayr’s answer to this question is a resounding “No,” and his own book is dedicated to showing readers an “exit” from the trap of Orientalism.

For Dallmayr, as well as many of Said’s critics, *Orientalism* suffers from another theoretical shortcoming. Specifically, Dallmayr draws attention to what appears to be an inconsistency in Said’s argument. On the one hand, Said insists that Orientalism is a representation, “an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality” (Said quoted in Dallmayr 1996, xvi). On the other hand, Said also “juxtaposed and contrasted the Orient as constructed by Orientalist discourse” to something that he called the “real” or “true” Orient untouched by Western categories (ibid). On Dallmayr’s account, Said’s oscillation between a radical constructivism and what he calls “a bland sort of realism,” as well as his reifying conceptions of Orientalism, ultimately serve to blunt the critical edge of his indictment of Orientalism (ibid).8

Despite these critical comments, Dallmayr concedes that Said’s project is “not entirely devoid of glimpses pointing beyond the polarity of construction and realism” (1996, xvi-xvii). As evidence of this Dallmayr points us to Said’s evolving reflections on the relationship between knowledge and power in *Covering Islam* (1981), a book which together with *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Orientalism* completes Said’s “trilogy.” Specifically, Dallmayr points readers to Said’s last chapter in the book, in which he reflects on the question of whether objective knowledge of another culture is really possible. Said concludes that “All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and

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8 Dallmayr discusses the tension between what he refers to as Said’s realism and his constructivism in greater detail in his *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village* (1998), specifically Chapter 2. The conclusion he reaches with regards to Said’s *Orientalism* is the same.
interpretation” (1981, 154). This leads Said to suggest that “knowledge of another culture is possible […] if two conditions are fulfilled. […] One, the student must feel that he or she is answerable to and in uncoercive contact with the culture and the people being studied” (ibid). The second condition, Said writes, “complements and fulfills the first. Knowledge of the social world, as opposed to knowledge of nature, is at bottom what I have been calling interpretation” (1981, 155). It is within the context of his discussion of the relationship between interpretation, understanding, and knowledge that Said makes a brief but approving reference to Gadamerian hermeneutics (Said 1981, 157).

For Dallmayr, the redeeming feature of Said’s work is precisely this endorsement of Gadamer, i.e., Said’s tentative opening towards “hermeneutical interrogation” more generally (Dallmayr 1996, xvii).

In his tribute to Said in Small Wonder (2005), Dallmayr elaborates further on what he perceives to be Said’s turn towards (Gadamerian) hermeneutics. As Dallmayr writes, “Said’s later work, and especially [his] 2003 preface [to Orientalism], show signs

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9 In particular, Said quotes the following passage from Gadamer’s Truth and Method: “A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one’s self, but the conscious assimilation of one’s foremeanings […] and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one’s own foremeanings” (1981, 157). Said uses this quote to drive home the point that there is no “neutral,” value-free interpretation. As he writes, “there is never interpretation, understanding, and then knowledge where there is no interest” (ibid). However, unlike Gadamer and Dallmayr, Said seeks to draw attention to the circumstances that make one culture or tradition available for interpretation. For example, he argues that no one today simply happens upon Islam or Islamic society out of pure curiosity. He writes that citizens of Western states today encounter Islam “by virtue either of the political oil crisis, or of intense media attention, or of the longstanding tradition of expert [i.e., Orientalist] commentary on Islam in the West” (ibid).

10 Dallmayr applies the same criterion in assessing the work of other scholars. He evaluates the soundness of a given argument based on its approval or disapproval of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. For example, in Alternative Visions (1998), Dallmayr speaks approvingly of Tsenay Serequeberhan’s The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy because the book, as whole, endorses Gadamer’s hermeneutic project. By contrast, he is far more critical of Valentin Mudimbe’s The Invention of Africa, a book that takes its inspiration from Said’s Orientalism but applies its insights to the Western knowledge of and representations of (colonial) Africa.
of considerable seasoning and deepening circumspection” (Dallmayr 2005, 108). For Dallmayr, the most significant marks of this “seasoning” concern Said’s evolving thought on the “relation between interpretation and domination or between humanism and power” (ibid). In the 2003 preface to the book, Said draws a clear distinction between two types of knowledge: knowledge for the purposes of “coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons”, and knowledge for the purposes of “control and external domination” (Said 2003, xix). Dallmayr labels these dialogic (or hermeneutical) and unilateral modes of understanding respectively, and once again sees in this distinction a clear turning on Said’s part towards Gadamer’s hermeneutic project (Dallmayr 2005, 108-109).

Dallmayr praises Said for his diminishing preference for “agonistic writers” like Foucault and Gramsci – writers who, on Dallmayr’s account, were overly preoccupied with sociopolitical struggle and conflict at the expense of issues related to coexistence – and commends Said for his turn towards a more “humanistic” tradition composed of mentors such as Herder, Goethe, Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Gadamer among others (Dallmayr 2005, 109; see also Said 2003, xxiv). Although Dallmayr is careful to note that “the turn to humanism and dialogical understanding” need not imply “a neglect of domination and hegemonic power differentials” (2005, 108-109), his repeated critique of Said for his polemical language and ongoing preoccupation with these issue, suggests an unwillingness on Dallmayr’s part to theorize power, conflict, and domination – an unwillingness that can easily translate into neglect of these topics.  

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11 Elsewhere Dallmayr critiques the discipline of political science as a whole for exhibiting a “prevailing professional fascination with political power – a fascination tending to trump or screen out concern with justice, ethics, and legitimacy” (2002, 34). According to Dallmayr, political scientists’ fascination with power makes the discipline inhospitable to “Oakeshottian conversation (a model of conversation
How can we understand Dallmayr’s position? While he would certainly not deny the existence of persisting asymmetries of power in the world, Dallmayr would argue that an emphasis on power differentials detracts attention from exploring possibilities for dialogue and cooperation. At times, Dallmayr comes close to suggesting that to emphasize unequal power relations, as Said does, is to automatically deny the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and coexistence. And yet Dallmayr does not make clear why such a conclusion must necessarily follow from the act of calling into question the possibility of “genuine” dialogue. In much of his recent work Dallmayr tends to equate authors who stress the unequal distribution of power in the world with the tradition of political realism or realpolitik. For him, the distinguishing feature of “realists” is that they “are prone to denounce the invocation – and the entire idea of dialogue among equal partners (or civilizations) – as an empty chimera or pipedream disconfirmed by the stark ‘reality’ of power differentials both in domestic and in international politics” (Dallmayr 2002a, 138). Although Dallmayr never describes Said as a “realist,” his critique of Said’s project – especially the latter’s refusal to articulate a positive alternative to Orientalism – can be understood against the context of Dallmayr’s understood as an “unrehearsed intellectual adventure,” akin to that offered by Gadamer) – since, predicated on command and submission, power cannot be equally shared and hence seems to call either for a ‘symposiarch’ or else for a wordless struggle for power”. Dallmayr essentially concludes that those scholars (such as Ian Shapiro) who believe that “politics is about interests and power” must necessarily be opposed to dialogue and democratic deliberation. While Shapiro may have called for the end of deliberation on the grounds that politics is at base about power, to generalize from this isolated case that all those who question dialogue are necessarily echoing the views of Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction is overly reductive and misguided. To question the possibility of “genuine” dialogue is not equivalent to its rejection.

12 Elsewhere Dallmayr points out that the same “denunciation” of dialogue can be encountered in the work of some “left-leaning (especially postmodern) intellectuals who talk at length about radical asymmetry or a stark incommensurability of language games and cultures” (2002, 66).
own advocacy of intercultural dialogue as a clear antidote to domination. More broadly, Dallmayr’s approach also coincides with the return of liberalism and idealism in international politics.

As Leigh Jenco argues, many cross-cultural theorists (including Dallmayr) embrace the dialogic approach because it aligns itself with “democratic, Marxist, or other forms of emancipatory politics that aim to foster possibilities of resistance within the cross-cultural encounter” (2007, 744). That is to say, on Jenco’s account these scholars “endorse dialogue […] on the grounds that it engenders egalitarian norms [and politics] by building them into the terms of the encounter” (ibid). This is certainly consistent with Dallmayr’s approach. And yet, what is missing from this perspective is an acknowledgement that hierarchies of culture and power can exist within the structure of dialogue itself. While Dallmayr is right to suggest that “we cannot and should not oppose empire with empire,” it does not immediately follow that one can simply oppose empire (and Orientalism) with dialogue, especially in cases where that dialogue is initiated by the more powerful.

We are now in a better position to appreciate and summarize Dallmayr’s understanding of Orientalism. He clearly associates the term with power politics (2002, 32), as well as with attempts “to appropriate and domesticate the East for Western consumption (ibid, 9). Dallmayr also describes Orientalism as “the effort to dominate and ‘talk down’ the other, in such a manner that the Occident was never called into question (or never allowed itself to be questioned)” (ibid, 28). Similar to Foucault and Said, Dallmayr likewise views Orientalism as a practice that draws a sharp dividing line between the West and the East, and argues that the same dividing line has been
reproduced by political theorists who, taking shelter behind it, "have tended to cultivate and rehearse the so-called canon of Western political ideas and ‘great books’, while refusing on the whole to venture beyond these canonical confines (or else venturing forward only with the imperialist gesture characteristic of Orientalism)” (ibid, 33). What Dallmayr takes from Said, therefore, is an understanding of “Orientalism” as a term that carries a pejorative meaning.

In the end, Dallmayr’s respective praise and critique of Said reveals more about Dallmayr’s project than it does about Said’s work. It discloses an effort to establish Gadamer’s dialogic model as the definitive answer to the impasses of Orientalism (understood in its pejorative sense). This, in turn, has the added effect of clearly demarcating Dallmayr’s project from Orientalist modes of scholarship and knowledge production. As such, Said’s critique of Orientalism emerges as a foil against which Dallmayr can make a case for the validity and importance of his own project. This explains the absence of any sustained engagement on Dallmayr’s part with Said’s work, which despite its theoretical flaws poses questions that need to be asked by everyone who engages in the study of non-Western traditions of thought.

**Roxanne Euben Reads Said**

Where Dallmayr appears to use Said’s characterization of Orientalism primarily as a means of distinguishing the project of comparative political theory from earlier hegemonic forms of scholarship, Euben enlists Said’s work for the purpose of dismantling negative, stereotypical images of Islam. Similar to Dallmayr, part of Euben’s broader theoretical project involves an attempt to expose the limits of Fukuyama’s “end of history” and Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theses that, in different ways, sought to explain the post-1989 world order and the trajectory of future international conflict. In
seeking to combat these narratives – narratives that, on Euben’s account, give expression to a post-Enlightenment rationalist epistemology “commit[ed] to reading the world as understandable, explicable, and knowable by way of human reason and methods” – Euben finds an ally in Edward Said (1999, 4).

In her *Enemy in the Mirror*, Euben draws on the insights of Said’s *Orientalism* in order to show that common to Fukuyama and Huntington’s otherwise contradictory theses about the direction of post-Cold War world politics is a shared assumption, underpinned by a rationalist epistemology, that Islamic “religio-political movements [...] stand in relation to Western, secular power and international order as the chaos of the particularistic, irrational, and archaic stand in relation to the universalistic, rational, and modern” (ibid, 7). Concerned with understanding the increasing power of Islamic fundamentalism in the contemporary world, Euben argues that current scholarship in the West exercises “a disciplining effect on the study of fundamentalism” in the same way that Orientalist scholarship as described by Said not only managed but also produced the “Orient” (ibid, 23). Filtered through Western categories of knowledge, Islamic fundamentalism emerges as the irrational other to the rational Western self. Just as Said critiqued Orientalist discourse for constructing a distorted image of the Orient, so too Euben’s book attempts to show that the image Westerners have of Islamic fundamentalism is illusory, the projection of a distorted picture not only of the other but also of the self.

Euben critiques prevailing social scientific approaches to the study of modern Islamic fundamentalism because they fail to take into account fundamentalists’ own understandings of their political thought and actions. Instead, such accounts tend to
portray fundamentalism as epiphenomenal, arguing that its “causes” ultimately lie in
certain socioeconomic and political circumstances. By portraying fundamentalism as an
irrational, knee-jerk reaction against the West, such materialist accounts “reinforce the
neglect of a fundamentalist system of ideas as a substantive vision for the world” (ibid,
23). Importantly, such explanations “preclude the possibility that fundamentalists are
drawn to religio-political ideas in much the same way that activists have been drawn
throughout history to democratic, liberal, or Marxist ideals” (ibid, 14). Utilizing a
Gadamerian inspired dialogic model of interpretation, Euben attempts to offer an
account of fundamentalism’s appeal “from the inside,” by examining and “engaging the
content of Islamic fundamentalist ideas on their own terms, or at least on as close to
their own terms as is possible for an interpreter whose position is exterior to the
worldview of the subject” (ibid, 155). By insisting on the centrality of participants’ own
self-understandings, Euben wants to make a case for understanding the moral power
inherent within those ideas that are routinely dismissed as “fundamentalist” versions of
Islam. As she insists, only in this way can we move beyond the reflex of dismissing
fundamentalism as irrational or pathological, as an ideology that holds meaning only for
lunatics and fanatics (ibid, 14).

While Euben applies Said’s insights in arguing that current scholarship on
fundamentalism constitutes an “exercise in power” in so far as it constructs an image of
Islamic fundamentalism that distorts the “meaning” of fundamentalist ideas, she departs
from Said in suggesting that rationalist “production” of fundamentalism does not
foreclose the possibility that “the currently hegemonic image of fundamentalism
generated by these explanations can help us understand its meanings” (ibid, 46). As
she explains, “the fact that Orientalist analyses are implicated in imperialist power is not sufficient reason to disqualify or negate the knowledges they produce” (ibid). For Euben, texts that serve imperialist interests may at one and the same time “reveal the workings of Euro-American power and capture a dimension of life in “the Orient” (ibid). Euben offers her analysis of Sayyid Qutb’s political thought and his indictment of modernity and rationalism as an example of reverse Orientalism (ibid: 125). Just as Said had suggested that Orientalist discourse says more about its “authors” than about the “Orient”, Euben likewise wants to suggest that Qutb’s critique can illuminate how the “Other constructs what we regard as the Self” (ibid, 125). To the extent that “we” can recognize ourselves in Qutb’s critique of modernity, Euben argues that we can begin to learn how to see ourselves through the lens of the Other, and we may gain insight into aspects of our own world that we may be unable or reluctant to see (ibid).

The upshot of this approach is that it allows Euben to place Qutb in conversation with Western critics of modernity (Arendt, MacIntyre, Taylor, Neuhaus, Bella, and Bell). By examining views of modernity from “both sides” – that is, by exploring how the discourses of the Western “Self” construct the “Other,” and by reversing the gaze to explore how the “Other” constructs the Western “Self” – Euben argues that her comparative approach makes possible for the boundaries between Self and Other to begin to blur (ibid, 126,127). Ultimately, the broader aim of Euben’s project is to

13 Sayyid Qutb was a 20th century Egyptian thinker who is primarily known in the West as the “patron saint of the modern jihadist movement” (Pagden 2009, 519) and as the “philosopher of Islamic terror” (March 2010, 191). Qutb became a leading figure of Islamic radicalism after an extended sojourn in the United States in the 1940s, a stay which had a profound impact on him. During his time in the US, he was appalled by American decadence and moral bankruptcy. Upon his return he published a series of highly influential books that had an enormous impact both on pragmatists as well as on practitioners of radical Islam. He was a critic of Nasserist socialism and Egyptian corruption, and was imprisoned and hanged in 1966.
“problematize categories such as ‘West’ and ‘non-West’, and the ways in which such categories are overlaid on generalized ahistorical oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (ibid, 169). She enlists Said’s analysis of Orientalism to counter stereotypical Western images of Islam, but she also departs from Said in important ways. Where Said’s *Orientalism* failed to give voice and agency to the colonized, Euben’s analysis of Sayyid Qutb’s work is intended to remedy this omission. By demonstrating that Qutb’s critique of the costs of modernity mirrors the moral and political anxieties about modernity articulated in the writings of contemporary Western thinkers, Euben’s aim is to show that both “Western” and “non-Western” political thinkers participate in shared conversations about the meaning of modernity. Importantly, Euben suggests that this cross-cultural comparison of critiques of modernity may ultimately work to undermine the very opposition and division between “West” and “Islam” by revealing the similarities between the two (ibid, 12). The focus on highlighting such commonalities between “Western” and “non-Western” intellectual traditions, Euben suggests, works to render the latter less alien and more familiar.

Euben takes a similar approach in her book *Journeys to the Other Shore* (2006), where her focus is once again on decentering the hegemony of the West. In this work Euben seeks to problematize those accounts that posit a direct historical relationship between travel, imperialism, and domination. While Euben does not deny that Western travel writing has played a role in producing stereotypical images of the “colonized other,” she suggests that recent academic interventions into the operations of power and knowledge production paradoxically reproduce the structure and organization of domination that they seek to critique. As Euben (2006, 2) writes, rather than displace
the West as the “epicenter of the world,” recent attempts to deconstruct mechanisms of domination end up reestablishing Western primacy. They do so by placing an overwhelming emphasis on the power of the West.

Instead of only investigating how Western travel writing produces the “other”, Euben proposes to reverse the gaze and explore how “travel and exploration by Muslims produced and transformed their own sense self and other” (ibid). By juxtaposing Muslim and European travel accounts, Euben’s aim is to reveal “common mechanisms of translation and mistranslation”, to reveal the common patterns by which Muslim and European travelers produce knowledge about others and themselves (ibid, 18). Uncovering a connection between the pursuit of knowledge, the attainment of wisdom, and the practice of travel in both Western and Muslim sources, Euben’s aim is to make visible “the extent to which the desire for new knowledge, the capacity for critical distance, curiosity about what is strange, and the will to remake another in one’s own image are not the purview of any one cultural constellation or any particular historical epoch” (ibid, 19). To highlighting these similarities, Euben argues, is to show that the West does not have a monopoly on “imperialist theorizing” or the sole power to represent its “others” (ibid, 19).

As Euben elaborates, it is precisely because the association of travel with the pursuit of knowledge is common to both Western and Muslim traditions – that is, because the world “travel” carries the same meaning and connotation in both traditions – that we can make fruitful comparisons between the two. Such comparisons reveal commonalities in the cross-cultural production of knowledge, commonalities which

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14 In particular, Euben juxtaposes and explores the travel writings of Herodotus and Ibn Battuta (Ch.3), Tocqueville and Al-Tahtawi (Ch. 4), Montesquieu and Sayyida Salme (Ch. 5).
disclose that representational power is not simply the purview of the West. For Euben, therefore, an emphasis on commonalities can help us avoid the traps of Orientalism (ibid, 42-45), as well as the concomitant conclusion that “cultures are morally and cognitively incommensurable” (1999, 10). Like Dallmayr before her, Euben also appropriates a negative understanding of Orientalism.

As I indicated in the introduction to this chapter, in addition to Dallmayr and Euben, a number of scholars whose work has been showcased in Dallmayr’s Global Encounters series position their respective arguments in relation to Said’s critique of Orientalism. Although not all of these scholars would self-identify as comparative political theorists, I treat them as such because their work was chosen to be included in Dallmayr’s series, whose central aim is to inaugurate comparative political theory as a new field of inquiry. While I cannot consider all of their work here, what is common to the essays collected in these volumes is their reliance on Said. As is the case with Dallmayr and Euben, few of these authors spend time discussing what Said meant by Orientalism or attempting to connect this work to his subsequent writings. It is more or less taken for granted that Orientalism refers to the epistemological and representational power that the West exercised over the so-called “Orient”. In some cases, scholars use Said in order to confirm and point to the persistence of binary oppositions such as “West” and “non-West,” which they then set about to problematize (see, for e.g., Sedeghi 2007). In other cases, scholars simply utilize the term Orientalism interchangeably with the term Eurocentrism to refer to those instances in which Westerners have depicted (and continue to depict) the non-West as inferior and
subordinate (see, for e.g., Jung 2007). Still others invoke Said’s work in order to critique its shortcomings and open the space for their own proposed alternatives to Orientalism. Regardless of whether they defend or critique Said, CPT scholars seem to invoke his work almost as a rite of passage, always in the context of discussions concerning issues of representation and knowledge production, as well as in the context of theorizing the relation between the Occident and Orient, East and West, Self and Other. While it is not at all surprising that the primary text of reference for most of these thinkers is *Orientalism*, it is important to note that there are few attempts to connect this work to Said’s later corpus or to study the ways in which he modified his argument in response to his critics. As such, what I think we can see here is the formation of Said as a discourse within the field of CPT. That is, Said has become a name that stands in for and evokes a certain position within CPT. This position is associated with a critique of hegemonic forms of representing and theorizing otherness. The theoretical limitations of Said’s critique of Orientalism, namely, his refusal to provide an alternative to the phenomenon he attacked, provide the ground from which subsequent debates and questions within comparative political theory about the most appropriate “exit” from Orientalism have emerged. Within current CPT literature, there are two broad approaches that purport to provide an exit from the “epistemological imperialism and authority” of Orientalism: (1) Farah Godrej and Leigh Jenco propose fieldwork or deep immersion in the cultural context of the non-Western traditions of thought as an escape from Orientalism/Eurocentrism; (2) By contrast, scholars such as Roxanne Euben and

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15 The inspiration behind this reading comes from Robert Nichols’s (2010) article “Postcolonial Studies and the Discourse of Foucault: Survey of a Field of Problematization.” In this article Nichols provides a critical survey of the ways in which Foucault has been used and interpreted within postcolonial studies, and the kinds of questions and debates his work has provoked within the field.
Fred Dallmayr favor Gadamer’s dialogic approach as a definitive exit from Orientalism.

The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to a critical examination of the arguments proffered by Jenco and Godrej. In turn, I examine the arguments in support of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics in Chapter 5.

**From Orientalism to Eurocentrism: Immersion, Conversion, and Cultural Appropriation**

Farah Godrej: Decentering Political Theory

Within the context of the above discussion, Farah Godrej addresses the challenges raised by Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism by proposing an approach that she terms “existential immersion.” Although Godrej does not directly engage with Said’s work, her concern with tackling the Eurocentrism\(^\text{16}\) of political theory, as well as her focus on correcting the mistranslations, misperceptions and distortions that have historically colored Western engagement with non-Western texts and ideas, can be understood as emerging in response to Said’s critique (2011, 50-51). Godrej admits that the project of comparative political theory is susceptible to the “appropriations and misappropriations that have accompanied Orientalist readings of otherness” (ibid, 51).

To remedy this situation, Godrej argues that theorists who wish to engage in comparative theoretical work, and do this well, will need to immerse themselves in the cultural context of the non-Western thinkers whose work (texts) they have chosen to study.

\(^\text{16}\) Godrej defines Eurocentrism as a particular posture towards knowledge: “Eurocentrism is seen as a projection of ‘the West’ and its disciplinary categories as a universal standard of knowledge against which all others are measured…Eurocentrism refers to those modes of understanding that see knowledge as emerging from the EuroAmerican West, and frame all other ways of knowing and being according to its presuppositions. They locate subjectivity and agency to know in the West, while treating other ways of life and other standards of knowing as objects to be studied, rather than sources of knowledge. As such, Eurocentrism is not only a set of institutional structures but also a posture toward knowledge” (Godrej 2011, 13). The parallels with Orientalism should be quite evident.
Why turn to immersion? How can immersion in otherness act as an antidote to Eurocentrism and Orientalism? Here it is useful to return to Said’s work. One of the pivotal terms in his analysis of the discourse of Orientalism is the notion of “exteriority.”¹⁷ For Said, exteriority describes the process by which the Orientalist scholar “makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (2003, 20-21). Stated differently, the Orientalist scholar is always outside the material or the subject he studies and writes about – both in an existential and moral sense – and it is this very outsidedness or exteriority that allows the Orientalist to carry out a task that “Orientals” are assumed to be unable to perform themselves, namely, representation. The ostensible inability of the “Orientals” to speak for themselves allows the Orientalist scholars to assume the responsibility of doing so. Exteriority, then, is what allows the Orientalist to objectify the Orient, to re-present it both for a Western and “Oriental” audience, without any concern for its actuality. It is the condition that makes possible the authority of the Orientalist.¹⁸

Throughout Orientalism, Said repeatedly places emphasis on the distance or separateness between the scholar and the Orient.¹⁹ He brings this to light through what

¹⁷ Said borrows this term from Michel Foucault’s The Archeology of Knowledge.

¹⁸ Exteriority, in effect, allows Said to shift attention away from the search for a “true” image of the Orient, and to focus on the literary tools and social conditions that inform how the Orient is portrayed. As Said explains, “the things to look for are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original” (Said 2003, 21).

¹⁹ Said writes, “The relationship between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object. Yet the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident. This cultural, temporal, and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise: phrases like ‘the veils of an Eastern bride’ or ‘the inscrutable Orient’ passed into the common language” (Said 2003, 222; emphasis mine). A little later, Saig again writes, “Every statement made by Orientalists…conveyed a sense of the irreducible distance separating…Occidental from Oriental” (ibid, 228; emphasis mine).
William Spanos (2009, 77) has called “the metaphors of vision.” Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of Said’s *Orientalism* is the overwhelming recurrence in the book of a wide array of terms that circulate around the central metaphor of vision. Describing the Orientalist as an agent endowed with comprehensive vision (Said 2003, 239) – “a vision by no means confined to the professional scholar, but rather a common possession of all who have thought about the Orient in the West” (2003, 69) – Said seeks to show how this vision enabled the spatially removed “spectator” (i.e. the Orientalist) to “survey,” “scrutinize,” “watch,” “view,” “see,” “observe,” “oversee,” “encompass,” “circumscribe,” “uncover,” “bring to light,” and “grasp” the Orient (see Spanos 2009, 79). Surveying the Orient from above, the Orientalist “gets hold of the whole sprawling panorama before him – culture, religion, mind, history, society” (Said 2003, 239). For Said, it is the Orientalist’s commanding gaze that enables him to reduce the complex historical diversity of the East, “the complex dynamics of human life” (ibid, 247), to a static “picture,” to an eternal and unchanging presence so as to render “its threatening mystery knowable, conquerable, and colonizable” (Spanos 2009, 78). The sense of distance and separateness conveyed through the metaphor of vision, Said leads us to believe, is what enabled Western hegemony over the Orient.

Godrej’s proposal for fieldwork and deep immersion can be understood, at least in part, as an attempt to avoid reproducing Orientalism’s “imperial eye.” It can also be understood as an effort to elaborate on and extend the insights of Raimundo Panikkar, who, as I explained in Chapter 2, placed great emphasis on the role of immersion in

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20 The following is a non-comprehensive list of the pages where Said explicitly mentions the word “vision” and its cognates: 43, 46, 58, 69, 72, 80, 83, 86, 101, 103, 114, 117, 119, 126, 127, 150, 157, 158, 160, 162, 163, 176, 196, 197, 202, 216, 230, 233, 237, 239, 240, 247.
reaching understanding of another culture, philosophy, and tradition of thought. Finally, Godrej’s insistence on the importance of immersion, and the physical dislocation that it necessarily entails, should also be understood as a critique of the centrality of the metaphor of travel to the practice of political theorizing. From Euben we have learned that, etymologically, the practice of theorizing (and the attainment of knowledge) is connected to travel, vision, visiting other lands, and direct experience. But once we look more closely into the metaphor, Godrej argues, we can begin to see that “the use of travel in political theory has not always coincided with actual, physical dislocative experience” (2011, 19). In those instances where theorists did engage in actual physical, rather than simply conceptual, travel, Godrej points out that this type of mobility most often occurred within the context of empire. Such travel, Godrej continues, “was almost never undertaken to investigate a non-Western civilization’s political-theoretic resources”, nor were non-Western intellectual resources deemed to be on par with those found in the West. As an example Godrej points to 18th century “German and Anglo-Orientalist projects,” which admittedly recognized the sophistication of Indian thought, but at the same time sough to prove that it could never quite match the complexity of Enlightenment thinking (ibid). On Godrej’s reading, therefore, imperial era travel and the encounters with otherness it engendered only served to reinforce the West’s own sense of superiority and exceptionalism.

Godrej proposes to delink the notion of travel from its historical connection to imperial power by stressing the need for actual physical dislocation, an actual departure from the comforts of home. For Godrej, to study and engage with non-Western traditions of thought (or “civilizational alterity”) in a way that does not replicate earlier
relations of dominations means that we cannot rely solely on theorizing as an act of imaginative travel. As Godrej argues, “the very purpose of encountering alterity is to disturb the knowledge arising from home and hearth” (2011, 19). A number of important elements begin to emerge as we unpack Godrej’s project of moving beyond Orientalism. First and foremost, from the perspective of the argument developed in this chapter, we can see that her critique of the travel metaphor is closely tied to the desire to distance contemporary theory from earlier imperialistic forms of theorizing. In this, Godrej replicates the gesture of other CPT scholars (e.g. Dallmayr) who similarly construct and re-imagine earlier 18th and 19th century Western attempts to study “alien” traditions of thought as less tolerant and more imperialist that perhaps they were. As I argued in the introduction to this chapter, Godrej’s cursory and somewhat inaccurate portrayal of East-West encounters during the colonial era prevents her from inquiring into the history of Orientalism. As such, she is unable to appreciate the similarities and continuities between her own project and earlier Orientalist attempts at cross-cultural learning. In turn, this leaves her vulnerable to the possibility of replicating Orientalism’s “quiet failure.”

Because Godrej understands Orientalism in its pejorative sense, she argues for a hermeneutic approach to the study of non-Western texts and traditions of thought that emphasizes “existential understanding” as a way of moving beyond the trope of travel associated simply with observing or gazing at otherness from afar. To avoid the appropriations and misappropriations that, according to Godrej, accompanied Orientalist readings of otherness, she maintains that “the comparative political theorist’s fist hermeneutic task lies in bringing herself as close as possible to the ‘world’ of the other
text, or concept or category, taking into account the perspective of the text’s (or concept’s) own cultural framework and a subsequent shrinking of the distance (both literal and metaphorical) between the reader and text” (2011, 54). Among other things, this first step towards a richer and more nuanced understanding of non-Western ideas involves “travel[ling] outside [one’s] own subjectivity and learning to read the text from within the framework of the text itself.” Such a hermeneutic approach, Godrej continues, suggests that the ideas within a text “cannot simply be understood by an analysis of the concepts in the texts itself.” Rather, this approach requires a “praxis-oriented existential transformation in which the reader herself learns to live by the very ideas expressed in the text” (2011, 54; emphasis mine). The existential method that Godrej proposes requires of the reader to not see herself as separate from the text under study, to not “gaze at the object from a distance” in an attempt to achieve scholarly objectivity. On this view, therefore, understanding is achieved “by becoming one with the ideas in the text,” by reducing any sense of separateness between knower and known, subject and object, or between interpreter and interpreted (ibid).

The emphasis on a praxis-oriented approach to textual understanding has profound implications for the work of comparative political theorists.21 To illustrate the merits of such an approach and what it might entail, Godrej offers an example from Hindu thought. She suggests that those scholars interested in understanding the Bhagavad Gita and the Sanskrit term dharma (religious duty or moral law) contained therein can attain a deeper and fuller understanding of the text only after they have tried

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21 Godrej’s emphasis on what she calls a praxis-oriented approach is partly inspired by Charles Taylor, who argued that “social theories are about practices’, and that any attempt to detach the texts in which these ideas are articulated from the social and cultural setting out of which they have come is a recipe for misunderstanding” (2006, 156).
to live by the central virtues and ideals elaborated in the text.²² Why should this be the case? The text of the Gita is a dialogue between prince Arjuna and Krishna, his companion and teacher. Faced with a fratricidal war, Arjuna turns to Krishna for advice, and the latter counsels the prince to fight, “to perform his duty [dharma] as a warrior, so that] rightful political authority can be restored” (Godrej 2011, 55). In seeking to understand the ethical and political implications of Krishna’s advice to Arjuna, Godrej argues that the Western scholar faces an interpretive challenge in that there is no direct equivalent to the notion of dharma or divinely ordained moral code in the Western tradition. How, then, must one proceed?

Godrej suggests that when confronted with the concept of dharma, Western scholars might look to Aquinas’ natural law as a first entry point into understanding the meaning of the term, and the broader implications of Krishna’s advice to the warrior-prince. The problem with this approach, however, is that it misses the fluidity of the term’s multiple meanings: “dharma has none of the connotations of divine rationality associated with natural law, nor does it specify the ways in which human laws, hierarchies and moral codes must be structured in order to mirror divinity” (Godrej 2011, 56). The concept of natural law is likewise inadequate because it cannot help us understand the broader message of the Gita. Is Krishna’s advice to Arjuna ultimately an advice that condones political violence? Or is the ultimate message of the Gita, as Gandhi believed, the message of ahimsa or non-violence?

²² Dharma is most frequently translated as moral law or religious duty. The term has both a general and a particular meaning. In its general sense, “to live dharmically means to align oneself with the supreme Truth of the divine force that sustains the cosmos.” In its particular meaning, dharma means “to live according to the righteous and sacred duties appropriate to one’s station in life” (Godrej 2011, 55).
Godrej turns to Gandhi for insight into how to resolve this interpretive dilemma. Gandhi argued that scholarly learning and exegesis was a necessary but ultimately insufficient method of understanding the meaning of any text. On Gandhi’s view, interpretation requires above all “experiencing the ideas, insights and virtues elaborated in the text” (ibid, 57). In other words, understanding a text requires “adherence and belief”. Following Gandhi, Godrej incorporates the requirement of adherence into her approach of “existential understanding.” This type of understanding suggests that the best way that we can understand texts from a different culture is “by penetrating the consciousness and lived experiences of those who live by the ideas expressed in a text” (ibid, 58). In other words, it suggests that we immerse ourselves in the adherent’s world. Such immersion, Godrej argues, “involves the scholar’s ability to penetrate a whole worldview, to produce a description of the adherent’s own self-understanding in relation to the text, and to do so in terms of their own language, practices and ideas” (ibid).

Godrej maintains that an existential hermeneutic does not imply the privileging of an “insider” perspective, but it does suggest that any attempt to detach a text from the context out of which it emerged can lead to misunderstanding (ibid).

How does existential immersion, and the physical self-dislocation it necessarily implies, contribute to our understanding of the *Gita*? In the context of textual interpretation, Godrej argues that self-dislocation calls for scholars to immerse themselves not only in the practices of knowledge production endemic to a given intellectual tradition, but also to tap into the particular life-worlds “that characterize adherence to specific texts and concepts within that tradition” (Godrej 2011, 59). An existential interpreter, Godrej writes, “is called upon to understand the concept of
dharma in the *Bhagavad Gita* in a praxis-oriented fashion, living the virtues described in the text” (ibid). To this end, such interpreters might consider integrating themselves into communities that attempt to live by these values. For instance, Western interpreters may choose to investigate experientially the dharmic life that Gandhi instituted at his Sevagram *ashram* in Wardha, India. There they can “participate in the daily schedule of prayer, meditation and labor, examining how daily readings of the *Gita* are combined with the practice of dharmic virtues” (Godrej 2011, 60). For Gandhi, Godrej clarifies, a dharmic life was a life characterized by constant self-examination and self-discipline geared towards the cultivation of ahimsa. He believed that the meaning of dharma as it appears in the context of the *Gita* was completely tied to the pursuit of ahimsa. On Gandhi’s view, “sustained adherence to ahimsa was the fulfillment of man’s highest dharma or duty” (ibid). A dharmic life, therefore, was a life of ahimsa, here understood not only in its most minimal sense of non-injuring to any living being, but in its broadest and most positive meaning as “the largest love, the greatest charity” (ibid).

By inserting themselves into and participating in the life of an ashram, an existential hermeneutic allows interpreters to gain access to the ways in which dharmic life is lived by its adherents. An interpreter, Godrej writes, “may insert herself in…conversations with and among community members who claim to live by a certain understanding of dharma and access their understandings and implementations of dharma” (Godrej 2011, 60). Such an approach, therefore, requires that the CPT scholar make use of methodologies typically employed by anthropologists, ethnographers, or comparative politics scholars (participant observation, interviews, etc). More to the point, such an approach would necessarily require that interpreters call upon
“imaginative and empathetic capacities that focus on penetrating the lived experience of a text” (ibid, 61). For Godrej, an existential approach that emphasizes a “perspective of adherence” is likely to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the text than would mere scholarly exegesis. Importantly, such an approach “is intended as a necessary complement to a deeply contextualized understanding of texts, in which historical, linguistic and cultural immersion play an equally important role” (2006, 171).

What does all this mean for our understanding of dharma as it appears in the Bhagavad Gita? How does such an approach help us arrive at a richer understanding of this sacred Hindu text? The scholar who visits and spends time in communities whose members claim to live dharmically, Godrej explains, may discover that the adherents’ interpretation of the Gita employs an interpretation of dharma that is closely tied to the cultivation of ahimsa or non-violence (2011, 61). As such, Godrej argues, the picture of dharma that emerges as a result of the interpreter’s existential immersion “is likely to demonstrate that the language of battle and violence in the Gita is to be taken poetically, rather than literally” (ibid). Indeed, as a result of spending time with ashram-dwellers and other community members, the interpreter may arrive at the conclusion that the message of the Gita is not to advocate a violent politics. Rather, Godrej explains, existential immersion makes it possible to see that “the battle depicted in the text is meant to represent the battlefield of the human mind”, and more specifically the mind’s struggle to overcome desire through detachment and disciplined action (ibid, 61).

It should have become clear by now that Godrej’s proposal for existential immersion is a recommendation for fieldwork. Godrej recognizes that the Gandhian ashram is not the only site or context in which scholars can study the concept of dharma
and the *Bhagavad Gita*. As she elaborates, “any good representation of the existential understanding of dharma must account for the existence of multiple, conflicting experiential voices” (ibid, 63). The task of the comparative political theorist, therefore, is to recognize that a multiplicity of differently positioned actors (Hindu nationalists, right-wing politicians, lower caste peasant workers) may have very different understandings of dharma. This means that a richer account of dharma will necessarily be accompanied “by good, self-reflexive, ethnographies and fieldwork-filled accounts of how certain populations experience the term and the text” (ibid, 64). As Godrej explains, none of these accounts “will aspire to authenticity, facticity or complete truth; rather, they will acknowledge their own incompleteness, the positionality of their authors, and the polyphony of the voices and experiences they are trying to capture, from different sites of analysis” (ibid).

What this means is that the initial moment of conscious self-dislocation and adherence, does not exhaust the task of the comparative political theorist. After the theorists have penetrated the world of the “other” text, what follows is a second hermeneutic moment in which the interpreter must step back and translate the lessons gleaned from the experience of existential immersion into scholarly commentary or textual form. Godrej terms this second interpretive moment “self-relocation,” a necessary return to one’s disciplinary home. For Godrej, the ultimate purpose of self-relocation is for the interpreter to bring back (to a Western audience) the knowledge gleaned through her lived experience. The task at hand becomes to engage in a theoretical discussion of the concepts of dharma and ahimsa so as to explicate how these concepts may shed light on “our” political life (Godrej 2011, 66). It implies asking
not only what these concepts may tell us about politics, but also how they may disrupt our familiar understandings of political life (ibid, 67).

As Godrej admits, the process of self-relocation necessarily implicates the political theorist in the project of representation (of representing alterity), a project which is fraught with multiple dangers. After all, doesn’t the theorist’s imperative to represent the world and experiences of the “other” for her colleagues push her to employ “the very tools of the observing external ‘gaze’ and ‘voice’” (Godrej 2011, 62), the very tools of Said’s imperial spectator? As Godrej asks, can existential understanding avoid being implicated in the power relations so famously described in Said’s Orientalism? And does not the very attempt to represent alterity imply an exegetical stance that places the interpreter outside of the perspective of adherence required by an existential, immersive understanding? Stated differently, Godrej asks if the comparative political theorist can hope to avoid reproducing the “epistemic violence” that characterized Orientalist knowledge production (ibid, 62-63, 67).

Attentive to some of the epistemic and methodological difficulties that attend ethnographic attempts to represent the “other,” Godrej insists that political theorists engaged in the kind of fieldwork she recommends can nevertheless avoid the problem of speaking for others. Pointing to a newer generation of scholarship in political science, anthropology and ethnography, Godrej writes that “good representation is no longer seen, as it once was, as the project of making the native’s experience transparent, and good scholarly accounts are no longer expected to be authoritative or accurate in the manner of an utterly objective participant-observer” (2011, 63). She argues that “rather than seeing themselves as authoritative representatives who give voice to otherwise
silenced others,” CPT scholars can begin to see themselves “as co-creators of meaning, inserting themselves into specific instances of dialogue with ‘native exegetes’ and allowing their cultural account to be a result of their own participation in these dialogues, rather than a result of their wholly ‘authentic’ scholarly gaze” (ibid).

For Godrej, the struggle to reconcile the conflicting imperatives of adherence (deep immersion) and scholarship (representation of otherness) yields a third, and final, hermeneutic moment in the interpretation of non-Western text, where scholars attempt to creatively reinterpret (or translate) such texts and ideas in order to make them speak across cultural boundaries (2011, 70). Stated differently, this third hermeneutic moment involves the struggle to reconcile methodological imperatives that seem at odds with one another. Where self-dislocation pushes the scholar to eliminate the distance between herself and her subject of study, the move toward self-relocation necessarily demands a return to the objectifying gaze of the external observer. This, in turn, involves the interpreter in another paradox, namely, the attempt to reconcile the historicism of the first hermeneutic moment with the ahistoricism of the third hermeneutic step (Godrej 2011, 69-70).

At this point, one may rightly wonder what the advantage of Godrej’s hermeneutic approach might be. How might the struggle to reconcile the experience of self-dislocation with the imperative of self-relocation free the political theorist from the traps of Orientalism and Eurocentrism? For Godrej the answer is clear. Engagement with radical alterity via an existential immersion into the lived experience of an alien text is necessarily accompanied by an experience of dislocation. For Godrej, it is precisely the experience of physical dislocation that allows CPT scholars to be “existentially and
epistemically forced outside their own Eurocentric categories of knowledge” (Godrej 2009, 164). This is because “physical encounters are more likely to ‘put at risk the deepest issues that give our lives the purposes’ we think they have [and] enact a dislocation that unsettles, disturbs, and even frightens” (ibid, 163). In this Godrej follows in the footsteps of prominent CPT scholars like Fred Dallmayr, who has similarly argued that encounters with alterity necessarily exercise a disruptive influence on the self.

For Godrej, such disruptions, thought painful and even frightening, are ultimately said to be beneficial as they are likely to produce profound transformations of self – transformations that can disrupt our settled understanding of political life. An immersion and surrender to otherness, followed by a necessary self-relocation, Godrej suggests, allows Western interpreters to cultivate “a deep respect for the texts, ideas and their multiple adherents in all their alterity” (2011, 95). According to Godrej, their immersion in a foreign tradition is what ultimately grants scholars the permission or creative license to “import ideas across boundaries, not in a blindly arrogant or appropriating way, but with the requisite methodological understanding to ensure that such incorporation occurs with care for the nature of the ideas and texts involved” (ibid).

Godrej’s theorization of the three hermeneutic steps involved in the interpretation of non-Western thought, and her claim that this approach puts scholars beyond the reach of Orientalism and Eurocentrism, raises a number of questions. One of the central assumptions in Godrej’s attempt to theorize the Western interpreter’s encounter with what she calls “the radical alterity” of non-Western texts and ideas is the profoundly disruptive character of the experience. Like Dallmayr, Godrej takes for granted that encounters with otherness always and invariably exercise a disruptive influence on the
self. But if this is really the case, how can we understand Godrej’s earlier claim that 18th century German and Anglo-Orientalist scholars did not appear to be much disturbed by the encounter with Indian thought? If anything, the encounter served to reinforce their sense of European exceptionalism. Because Godrej does not in fact theorize the cross-cultural encounter, she is unable to explain why the study of non-Western thought via an existential immersion in the local context within which that thought was produced can help scholars avoid the Western triumphalism that she believes characterized earlier 18th and 19th century attempts at cross-cultural learning.

Another potential problem that emerges from Godrej’s hermeneutic method is that although she confronts the limits of textual interpretation and exegesis by insisting on the importance of existential, or embodied understanding, her approach continues to privilege the Western scholarly community as the central audience. Godrej’s hypothetical theorist is preoccupied with translating her embodied experience into a language that would be intelligible to the community of scholars at home. But Godrej says nothing about the implications of this hermeneutic approach for how non-Western material might be taught to both undergraduate and graduate students. If Godrej insists that the study of non-Western thought must proceed from within, that is, from a perspective that is internal to the non-Western tradition and its central preoccupations, then how might students located in universities in the West hope to understand the ideas contained in the Bhagavad Gita, or Gandhi’s writings, or any other non-Western work? Godrej’s requirement for immersive understanding unnecessarily restricts the potential audience that can access these ideas. Short of being required to take
immersion trips to India, for example, how else might undergraduate students be able to penetrate the world from which the ideas in the Gita arose?

Godrej also places restrictions on the number of scholars who can actually engage in cross-cultural political thought by insisting on the centrality of linguistic competence for undertaking studies in non-Western thought. While she is right to emphasize that foreign language acquisition is important for anyone who wants to study political thought written in Chinese, for example, it is not sufficient to argue that knowledge of a non-European language always grants scholars privileged access to non-Western work, or allows them to meaningfully interrogate any kind of material in that language. Like the requirement for deep immersion, the requirement for linguistic competence may have the unintended effect of keeping scholars, who might otherwise be interested in pursuing comparative political thought, from engaging with non-Western traditions and ideas.

**Leigh Jenco: Recentering Political Theory**

Like Godrej, Leigh Jenco similarly places emphasis on deep immersion in the cultural and institutional context from within which non-Western works of political thought emerge as an absolute prerequisite for proper interpretation and a possible exit from Orientalism/Eurocentrism. Unlike Godrej, however, Jenco offers a more radical response to Orientalism and Eurocentrism. She suggests that an effective destabilization of Eurocentrism – by which she means “the cognitive hegemony of categories rooted in Western European and to a lesser extent American intellectual and historical experience” (Jenco 2011, 27) – calls for scholars to embed themselves and work within foreign epistemic communities, or what she calls “localized communities of knowledge.” Where Godrej intervenes in recent debates about the need to
deparochialize Western political thought by promoting immersion in non-Western contexts, Jenco views this form of intervention as inadequate because its ultimate target remains a Western audience and Western scholarly concerns.

As Jenco points out, much recent work in comparative political theory formulates solutions to the problem of Eurocentrism that are geared towards exposing the silences and closures “enacted within Europeanized discourse as its local categories become inscribed as universal ones” (ibid, 30). On Jenco’s account, however, the same critical stance that “undermines the certainty of Europeanized categories […] also returns the theorist to the very audience and discourse whose terms originally prompted the critique” (ibid). Although this intervention appears to address Eurocentrism on one level, Jenco argues that it reconstitutes it on another: “the analysis chastens Europeanized categories only in so far as it continues to inhabit them” (ibid). In other words, on Jenco’s account, much recent scholarship in CPT is unable to free itself from the grips of Eurocentrism because such scholarship continues to rely on and inhabit the very categories and structures of Western domination it seeks to undo (see Jenco 2007, 743).

Jenco recognizes that comparative political theorists have made pioneering strides in opening the Western canon to “global sources of insight and knowledge,” but she worries that their methods and “frames of inquiry ultimately remain beholden to modern Western epistemological debates” (Jenco 2007, 745). For Jenco, current efforts on the part of CPT to “provincialize” Western categories of thought rest on the prior assumption that, as a result of colonial domination, these categories have become inescapable and indispensable to the way we think about and try to comprehend
difference (different traditions of thought).\textsuperscript{23} Given the pervasiveness of European thought categories, the most we can hope to do, on this view, is to problematize such concepts and categories, and expose their limitations when it comes to understanding different thought traditions and ways of life. On this view, therefore, Eurocentism emerges as a necessary prejudice (understood in the Gadamerian sense of the term), as a destiny that can never be fully overcome but which, at best, can be negotiated, problematized, and put into conversations with other perspectives (Jenco 2011, 28; also Jenco 2007).\textsuperscript{24}

For Jenco, the problem with this approach is that it exploits non-Western traditions for their comparative potential (2007a, 284), deeming such traditions “useful” only in so far as they can be used as case studies that can offer alternative views of self, culture, or society, and that can thereby illuminate the deficiencies of our own theories (2007, 745). On Jenco’s account, the most problematic consequence of this approach to cross-cultural study is that it circumscribes our access to alternative forms of inquiry, and denies us the “capacity to conduct self-sufficient theoretical inquiry in non-Western intellectual and social traditions” (ibid). She argues that much CPT

\textsuperscript{23} Jenco reads CPT’s stance towards Eurocentrism in the context of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s \textit{Provincializing Europe} (2008 [2000]). Chakrabarty argues that European thought “is at once indispensible and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody’s heritage and affects us all – may be renewed from and for the margins” (2008, 16). As a result of colonialism, Chakrabarty argues that it “is impossible to \textit{think of} [the phenomenon of political modernity] anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history” (ibid, 4).

\textsuperscript{24} This view can be explicitly seen in Farah Godrej’s (2011) treatment of the problem of Eurocentrism. Godrej points out that one of the merits of existential immersion in non-Western traditions is that such immersion can reveal the extent to which non-Western thought is permeated with Western categories as a result of decades (if not centuries) of responding to, dialoguing with, and framing non-Western preoccupations in response to engagement with Western thought. See especially Chapter 5.
scholarship uses the encounter with otherness simply as a means of enhancing “the interpretive richness of our self-reflections by making us even more aware of the silences and contingency of ‘our’ own sources of knowledge” (Jenco 2011, 32). Taking to task the paradoxical self-referentiality of these responses to the problem of Eurocentrism, Jenco argues that such responses ignore “possibilities for fundamental transformations in knowledge production prompted not only by the inclusion of cases and voices that our own theories marginalize, but also from shifts in the very audience, language, and resources assumed in the production of intellectual work” (ibid).

Referencing the work of Euben and Godrej as one example of this trend, Jenco argues that the work of these scholars is not geared towards “advancing political theory along non-Western lines” or making it available to non-Western audiences; rather, their work seems to be primarily aimed at enhancing the discipline’s capacity for self-reflection. The result is that such approaches end up effacing the ability of historically marginalized traditions of thought to “discipline our own inquiry” and work to prevent non-Western thought from “displacing the very debates or categories” in the Western tradition that are recognized to be problematic (Jenco 2011, 32-33). For Jenco (2012, 92), CPT’s focus on enhancing political theory’s self-reflexivity about it’s own values prevents scholars from asking the more difficult question: can political theory’s foundational assumptions and disciplinary conversation be “decisively challenged, and possibly replaced,” by foreign ones?

In Jenco’s critique of recent CPT work we can already see a proposal for a different solution to the problem of Eurocentrism and Orientalism. If most CPT scholarship tends to identify Eurocentrism with the historical exclusion of non-Western
thought from the Western canon, Jenco isolates at least one other form of Eurocentrism that stands in need of redress. This second form of Eurocentrism is the “Eurocentrism that fails to take seriously alternatives to Europeanized theory as a necessary or default source of critical intellectual analysis” (Jenco 2011, 33). This form of Eurocentrism, Jenco argues, ignores and refuses to see theories that emerge from non-Western locations as being capable of formulating more generalizable claims about political life (ibid, 34).

To address this second form of Eurocentrism Jenco advocates a more radical approach that calls for the “recentering” of political theory in local contexts. A recentered political theory, on this view, is an approach that asks scholars to theorize within, rather than about, foreign sites of knowledge production. Rather than construct a “third space” of dialogue or contrast with historically excluded non-Western traditions, Jenco argues that we should take seriously the broader ambitions of non-Western thought to wider-than-local significance and application (Jenco 2011). As Jenco reminds us, Kyoto School philosophy and New Confucianism do not always confine their claims to existing members of those traditions, but often assume that their research and theories “name and resolve more general human dilemmas” (Jenco 2011, 34). Rather than holding relevance only for Japan or China, Jenco wants to suggest that Western

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25 The Kyoto School is the name given to a group of 20th century Japanese philosophers who studied and/or taught at Kyoto University, and who were all inspired by Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945). Nishida is widely considered to be Japan's first and greatest modern philosopher. While there is no single creed that unites members of the school, what they all share in common is a commitment to engaging in East-West dialogue "on a rigorously philosophical level" (Davis et al 2011, 2).
thinkers can also *use*, analyze, and take up concerns articulated from within Chinese or Japanese philosophy, rather than simply study them.\textsuperscript{26}

To accomplish the task of recentering political theory, Jenco argues that scholars must detach themselves from their Eurocentric home disciplines and join epistemic communities in the non-West. In fact, she does not discount the possibility that overcoming Eurocentrism might necessitate not only learning non-Western scholarly practices of knowledge production but also the possibility of *conversion* – conversion to a new way of thinking, a new way of theorizing, and a new way of life. As Jenco points out, conversion is an “event [that] many different traditions expect and even welcome in the course of learning something new” (2007, 753). In fact, she urges us to recognize that some forms of understanding may require that we “abandon our current beliefs completely and *become* something that we now are not, committed to a new Way” (ibid).

Jenco believes that cross-cultural learning should not simply involve recognizing the value of non-Western traditions of thought; a more substantive engagement with these traditions, Jenco maintains, means that scholars also need to pay attention to and learn the theoretical, methodological, and practical means by which non-Westerners have engaged with Western thought. She offers as an example the methodological claims and debates associated with the neo-Confucian “Western Learning”, a reform movement that began in mid-nineteenth century China and emphasized foreign borrowing and imitation of Western institutions. The central problem that structured this

\textsuperscript{26} Within this context Jenco also points to Negritude and Islamic feminism as two movements that, although working to redress the concerns of specific groups, nevertheless articulate more general claims about “how and whose terms their group relates to others that exist outside it” (2011, 34).
debate was how, if at all, Chinese society could come to imitate Western values and principles in a way that would also have meaning for them (Jenco 2012, 93). For Jenco, this debate is useful because it provides us with a specific example of how a given culture (China) attempted to produce meaning along foreign lines. While I shall have more to say about this in the next chapter, at this point it suffices to say that by drawing attention to this debate, Jenco seeks to convince her interlocutors of the worth of borrowing from non-Western cultures and the proper methods of doing so.

In her review and critique of recent Western literature on Confucianism written between 2003 and 2005, Jenco remarks that while all of the authors discussed view Confucianism as capable of holding its own against Western traditions, none of them “dare claim it (as many of its supporters do) as their own way of life, much less as a world philosophy” (2007a, 285). What Jenco seems to suggest via her critique is that an overcoming of Eurocentrism would mean embracing, advocating, and living by the principle articulated in philosophies like Confucianism. After all, Jenco adds, “it does not seem odd to Westerners to see a non-Westerner advocate liberalism or socialism, but Westerners would be quite taken aback were one to identify himself or herself as Confucian” (2007a, 285). As such, Jenco’s approach to immersion appears quite radical in comparison to that proposed by Godrej. While Godrej’s argument about adherence to a belief seems to parallel Jenco’s suggestion that scholars should learn to live by philosophies like Confucianism, Godrej’s scholar is ultimately able to terminate this adherence and make the journey home. By contrast, the kind of immersion Jenco recommends seems to demand an almost total conversion to a new way of life as an absolute prerequisite to any substantive understanding.
Given that at present CPT work tends to confine the global ambitions of non-Western thought to a local context and application, Jenco suggests that the task of recentering political theory requires a reconceptualization of what we mean by “local.” Citing the work of Godrej, Euben, and Dallmayr among others, Jenco argues that much recent work in comparative political theory views knowledge as local and rooted. Inspired by Gadamer’s insights, on this view the “local” stands for a “cultural context that permanently conditions our understanding and argumentative claims” and into which individuals are firmly rooted (Jenco 2011, 28). As Jenco points out, for scholars indebted to Gadamer’s teachings the notion of rootedness in a tradition is one of the constitutive problems of cross-cultural understanding. For example, the assumption shared by all three theorists, according to Jenco, is that Western researchers, because of their rootedness in their local, Europeanized categories and traditions of scholarship, are ultimately unable to transcend their own “situated particularity radically enough” to do more than simply “negotiate” or engage in “conversations” with differently situated non-Western perspectives (2011, 33). Paradoxically, this leads CPT advocates to argue that any project of including non-Western thought into the Western canon cannot transcend its own origins in European Enlightenment thought (ibid). Ultimately, Jenco maintains that the emphasis on individuals’ rootedness in a particular tradition that undergirds much recent work in CPT serves as an excuse that allows scholars to return and remain confined within the Eurocentric categories they already work within.

Because this approach is an inadequate escape from Eurocentrism, Jenco argues for a reconceptualization of the “local” not as a cultural context that permanently conditions our understanding, but as a “particularized site for the circulation of
knowledge” (2011, 28). Rather than conceive of knowledge as rooted, Jenco argues that knowledge, although emerging from a local context, is always mobile and constantly circulating. To demonstrate the unproductiveness of conceiving of both scholars and knowledge as “rooted” in a culturally specific context, and to show that no necessary connection exists between context and research(er) – and more specifically the kind of research a scholar can do – Jenco offers as examples two phenomena: the debate about the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy within China, and the historical practice of Sinology. The “legitimacy” debate explored the issue of whether Chinese thought can and should be described as “philosophy”. Scholars on one side of the debate argued that to label Chinese classical thought as “philosophy” is an act of epistemic violence. On the other side of the dispute where scholars who argued that the term “philosophy” was broad and fluid enough to accommodate Chinese thought. Regardless of their opposite stances, both groups recognized the value of and sought to promote the relevance of traditional Chinese thought for modern audiences, both Sinophone and otherwise. As such, for Jenco, these scholars’ ambition to formulate theoretical claims with applicability beyond the national borders of China, illustrates that “locality does not function as a contingent particular evacuated of externally directed, universal ambitions, nor does it decisively determine the capacity of an individual scholar to produce theory along one line rather than another” (Jenco 2011, 37).\(^{27}\)

So what would a recentered political theory look like? Rather than seeking to enhance the field’s self-reflexivity, a recentered political theory would urge scholars to

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\(^{27}\) Jenco has written elsewhere that the goal of many contemporary Chinese intellectuals is to produce political theory “for all of us,” a theory that aspires to overcome the deficiencies in both Chinese and Western thought in order to bring into being “a compelling and persuasive vision for our future together” (Jenco 2007a, 274).
ask how their assumptions (and their disciplinary practices) can be challenged, and even replaced, by foreign ones. As a more effective way of displacing Eurocentrism, Jenco urges scholars to insert themselves in foreign scholarly communities, not simply as participant observers, but as active members willing to take up native scholarly practices, concerns, and debates. A model for this type of scholarship, Jenco argues, already exists in the field of Sinology. By engaging the scholarship produced by knowledge communities in China, Jenco argues that European, American, and Japanese scholars of Chinese studies have been able to demonstrate that they take local academic traditions seriously as capable of formulating original, compelling, and potentially generalizable reflections about political life. For example, early Sinologists who studied and worked on Chinese philosophical texts did so in close dependence to, and by building on, already existing Chinese forms of scholarship. Many of these scholars went on to produce work in collaboration with their Chinese colleagues and came to be recognized as academic equals by the Chinese themselves.

A recentered political theory, therefore, would mean that our focus should not be solely on texts (as is currently the case in most CPT literature), but on localized scholarly communities and the work that they produce. As Jenco elaborates,

Political theorists must join foreign colleagues to map knowledge differently, spending extensive time in a particular geographic region interacting with indigenous academics on their terms and in their language. These theorists do not only read canonical texts, but also treat scholars throughout the world like true colleagues by inviting them to conferences, reading their work, discussing their work with them, and engaging their findings in both native and foreign languages – much the way foreign scholars in American universities already do, by learning English and participating actively in Anglophone academia (2011, 46).

As Jenco admits, a political theory reconstructed along these lines would begin to resemble the scholarly practices typical of Area Studies, in which the dominant
language of research is often not English and where the main contributors are not scholars from American or Europe. She goes so far as to suggest that this way of engaging with non-Western thought might require us to abandon the notion of political theory altogether.

One might object that Jenco’s proposed solution to Orientalism and Eurocentrism is surely too extreme. Farah Godrej, for example, reads Jenco’s proposal that Western political theorists immerse themselves in foreign autonomous epistemic communities as an appeal for complete detachment and disengagement from one’s disciplinary home. On Godrej’s account, such total and irrevocable immersion in another tradition of political inquiry is hardly an obvious antidote to Eurocentrism. As she writes, “simply turning one’s back to one’s Eurocentric disciplinary home hardly constitutes a comprehensive solution to the problem” (Godrej 2011, 103). According to Godrej, such a view necessarily rests on the prior assumption that there exist pristine sites of scholarly discourse uncontaminated by Eurocentric categories and assumptions. What Jenco fails to appreciate, therefore, is the extent to which Eurocentrism permeates non-Western disciplinary structures, universities, research agendas, methodologies, etc. Citing the work of Syed Alatas (2006) in support of her argument, Godrej argues that any immersion in a non-Western tradition of thought will quickly reveal how much the categories, methods, and preoccupations of these traditions are shot through with Eurocentrism. This is because the questions members of these traditions ask were in many cases articulated in opposition to, or in dialogue with, Western ones (Godrej 2011, 101-102). As such, Godrej returns us once again to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument
regarding the difficulty of cleansing the consciousness of formerly colonized peoples from Western theoretical frameworks.

Although Godrej ultimately believes that there are independent/autonomous traditions of scholarship in the non-Western world, she argues that such traditions may not be as easy to identify as Jenco suggests because they are often “buried underneath existing discourses, lost in history, or often sidelined by mainstream social and political discourses” (Godrej 2011, 104). Recovering these sites of non-Eurocentric discourse, Godrej argues, “will often be a matter of rediscovery and revivification” that is, an act of (re)imagination rather than of simple discovery (ibid).28 She suggests that a more effective destabilization of Eurocentrism and parochial modes of political inquiry would necessitate that scholars ask and answer the following four questions:

[C]an we speak meaningfully about the uniqueness, autonomy or self-sufficiency of political theory discourse within any given tradition, and if so, how may we interrogate the categories of uniqueness and autonomy in that tradition? To what extent are concepts, categories, and methods emerging from that tradition existentially, historically, and intellectually alive, and how may we distinguish between these? Finally, what are the theoretical questions and dilemmas that preoccupy scholars in these communities of discourse, and what can we learn by centering their preoccupations about their own problems? (Godrej 2011, 104)

Contrasting her own approach to immersive understanding to the kind of immersion proposed by Jenco, Godrej argues that her own approach makes for a more effective displacement of Eurocentrism because it ultimately calls for scholars’ relocation and return to their disciplinary home. For Godrej, the experience of immersion followed by the inevitable return home ultimately helps scholars to place themselves “at the

28 All that is required to dislodge Eurocentrism, Godrej argues, “is a keen eye for the destabilizing possibilities inherent within the categories and frameworks already influenced by Eurocentric presumptions, a sensitivity to material that is marginalized or ignored as a theoretical possibility” (Godrej 2011, 119).
intersection of civilizational concerns” (2011, 121). This new positionality – that is, their status as both insiders and outsiders to a given theoretical tradition – allows them to look back with new eyes at their home, enabling them to bring new intellectual resources to bear in novel and creative ways that displace the centrality of the Western experience (ibid, 120-121). What Godrej wants to emphasize is that scholars are never “trapped” in the methods and practice of their Eurocentric home.

**Orientalism and the ‘Europeanization of the Earth’**

At its core, the disagreement between Godrej and Jenco has to do with the extent to which scholars can be free of Eurocentrism. Both theorists believe that Western trained scholars can escape the clutches of Eurocentrism, but propose different ways of affecting that escape. For Godrej, one can meaningfully dislodge Eurocentrism by engaging in acts of self-dislocation and self-relocation. While Jenco proposes a similar approach, unlike Godrej she stops short of arguing that self-relocation is an absolute prerequisite for a successful exit. Instead, Jenco suggests that the only way scholars can extricate themselves from the traps of Eurocentrism is by immersing themselves fully in a foreign way of life and working within non-Western epistemic communities.

Godrej and Jenco’s distinctive responses to the problem of Orientalism/Eurocentrism can be placed in an interesting relationship with Heidegger’s notion of the “Europeanization of the Earth” discussed in the previous chapter, and more specifically with J.L. Mehta’s distinctive response to it. 29 Recall that Heidegger postulates the existence of a type of representational, calculating rationality, which he

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29 The possibility of a fruitful comparison between Orientalism and the Europeanization of the Earth is suggested, but not explored, by Wilhelm Halbfass (1994, 13).
argued is distinctly European in essence. While he did not explicitly associate this mode of representational thinking with economic and political power, according to Halbfass, Heidegger did see “the will to power” as something inherent in this type of objectifying thought (1994, 13). As I showed in the previous chapter, Heidegger argued that the global spread of representational thinking acts to deprive other cultures of their ability to speak for themselves.

In a similar way, in his Orientalism Said argued that there is something distinctive about the way that Western (European) thought approaches the non-Western world. Specifically, he argued that Western knowledge of the “Orient” is “inseparable from claims of mastery, superiority, and domination” (ibid), and sought to show that when the Western scholar approaches and seeks to comprehend the non-Western world, he does so in a way that deprives the non-West of its agency. In different ways, then, both Heidegger and Said posited the existence and pervasiveness of a dominative mode of thinking that exerts mastery over the “other”, and robs the other of the ability to speak. In so far as Jenco and Godrej understand Eurocentrism as a particular posture towards knowledge, one that treats the “other” as an object to be studied thereby depriving it of any agency, their conception of this phenomenon parallels that of Heidegger and Said.\(^{30}\)

As I explained in chapter 2, J.L. Mehta accepted Heidegger’s thesis about the spread and pervasiveness of Western representational, objectifying, and calculating thought. He accepted the irreversibility of Europeanization and recognized that this mode of thinking had attained planetary proportions. In so far as Godrej recognizes the pervasiveness of Eurocentric assumptions in non-Western thought, her approach to the

\(^{30}\) This is not to deny that there are enormous differences between the thinkers discussed.
problem seems to parallel that of Mehta. Unlike Jenco and Godrej, however, Mehta repeatedly emphasized that the relationship between the Western self and the non-Western other was asymmetrical and unequal. He insisted that this asymmetry had to be accepted and worked through. Mehta, and following him Halbfass, came to the conclusion that the only way forward was “to go along with this Europeanization and to go through it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and the strange can we [the non-West] win back our self-hood; here as elsewhere the way to what is closest to us is the longest way back” (Mehta quoted in Halbfass 1988, 442). It is in this way that Mehta responded to Heidegger’s thesis about the inescapability of Europeanization. By bringing together Mehta with Godrej and Jenco we can begin to appreciate how the contemporary concern on the part of CPT scholars to find an exit from Orientalism/Eurocentrism repeats, in important ways, their predecessors’ attempts to respond to the challenge of Europeanization.

It is important to note, however, that neither Mehta nor Halbfass (who also grappled with the same issue) clarify in a straightforward way what they mean when both propose that the way out of Europeanization is to go along with it and to go through it. Nevertheless, allow me to suggest an answer. Recall that one of Mehta’s central concerns had to do with liberating Indian thought from subservience to western categories so as to pave the way for an Indian swaraj in ideas. Like Godrej, Mehta recognized that non-Western thought is permeated with Western categories and, like her, he did not believe that this was necessarily an obstacle to achieving understanding.

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31 The asymmetry Mehta speaks of has to do with the language of the encounter, i.e. with “the conceptual tools of articulating selfhood and otherness which are available to the participants in the encounter” (Halbfass 1994b, 303).
He argued that the challenge faced by an Indian scholar who seeks to reinterpret the Vedanta, for example, demands a twofold response: both a reaching out into the foreign and the “unhomelike,” and a return to one’s own tradition. Following Heidegger, Mehta argued that the (creative) re-appropriation of one’s own tradition could occur only as a “homecoming,” as a return from a journey into the alien and foreign (1992, 97). Mehta’s advice to his Indian colleagues illustrates this point well. An Indian scholar who wishes to reinterpret the Vedanta, Mehta writes,

*has* to make use of terms and concepts deriving from Western philosophy, because he is also unavoidably a participant in the horizon of intelligibility stemming from the West, creative and vital, expanding and ceaselessly changing in its kaleidoscopic variety. As such a participant he must learn to live in *that* horizon as another, appropriate it for its own sake and, so far as he can, in its own terms; wander around in ways that lead in the direction of what is questionable and questionworthy [...] and reach out to what is remote and strange, knowing that in the last instance this is not vain adventure but a homecoming” (1970, 316; emphases in original).

Godrej’s conceptualization of existential immersion parallels Mehta’s description of the process whereby an Indian scholar may come to an appreciation and reinterpretation of his own tradition in the context of the widespread dominance of representational thinking. Nevertheless, one crucial distinction that emerges here is that, in Godrej’s account, the overcoming of Eurocentrism is discussed in the context of providing Western scholars with the tools necessary to gain a better understanding of non-Western thought. While Godrej does speak about an eventual self-relocation (or homecoming in Mehta’s words), her account is not oriented towards discussing how Western scholars can begin to grapple with their own distinct tradition in new and creative ways.

This already points to a difference, perhaps subtle but by no means insignificant, between the thinkers in questions. While Mehta’s scholar journeys outwards from a
wounded civilization, from an “Orient of the West’s imagination and coinage” (Mehta 1992, 271), Godrej’s scholar sets forth from a hegemonic civilization, one that has extended its values and categories across the globe. In comparison to Godrej, Mehta consistently highlights the role that the other plays for self-understanding: “I am convinced that we in the Orient…can come back to ourselves at this moment in history only by passing through the West, as a pilgrimage to our own selfhood, and mediated by this passage through the West” (1992, 271). As such, he continuously displayed an awareness of the ways in which the Indian tradition was influenced by the encounter with the West. Unlike Mehta, Godrej’s approach uncritically accepts the superiority and hegemony of the West and curiously fails to draw attention to the role of the non-West in the making of Western self-understanding.

Although many CPT practitioners repeatedly insist that the value of turning to non-Western thought is that this can help Western scholars rethink their own theoretical tradition, an elaboration of what such a rethinking might mean for the future of political theory as a discipline is still missing from the CPT literature. Indeed, few such observations are accompanied by reflection and critical reexamination of the Western tradition and heritage. To their credit, Godrej and Jenco offer glimpses into what such a reassessment may look like.

**Conclusion: Repeating Orientalism**

In this chapter I have offered an admittedly non-comprehensive critical survey of the ways in which Said has been used in the literature of comparative political theory. While I have commented along the way on the specific ways in which thinkers like Euben and Dallmayr have utilized and problematized Said, my primary interest has been to map the generalizable pattern that emerges when one reviews CPT’s
engagement with the critique of Orientalism. One of the first things that immediately stands out is the way in which the term “Orientalism” is gradually becoming replaced by the term “Eurocentrism” in the newest work of comparative political theory.\(^{32}\) This is not to say that scholars like Godrej and Jenco have abandoned Said. On the contrary, references to his work continue to abound (especially in Godrej’s writings), the only difference being that Said is progressively becoming relegated to the footnotes. The ghost of Said continues to haunt the way CPT scholars develop their arguments and position their work.

We can also begin to see another important pattern. Partly as a result of their somewhat cursory engagement with *Orientalism*, and partly as a consequence of Said’s downplaying of the existence of a more sympathetic and non-reductive Orientalist tradition, CPT scholars have retrieved from that work an altogether pejorative understanding of the Orientalist project. In light of this, it is understandable that they should seek to distance themselves as much as possible from the Orientalist tradition that Said critiqued. At the same time that CPT proponents critique Said for his essentializing and undifferentiated conception of the West, they simultaneously embrace Said’s primarily negative portrayal of Orientalist scholarship as a way of distinguishing their own project from 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century European attempts to study non-Western societies and cultures. Not surprisingly, the result of this move is that CPT scholars end up reproducing Said’s omissions. Just as Said downplayed the existence of an alternative form of Orientalist scholarship, CPT scholars, following Said, are led to obscure that tradition as well. As Megan Thomas observes, precisely because they

\(^{32}\) As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Eurocentrism, according to Halbfass, also coincides with the Europeanization of the Earth.
have adopted Said’s characterization of Orientalism, CPT scholars have not been able to recognize that their project shares certain important similarities with earlier Orientalist scholarship (Thomas 2010, 665). To these observations I would also add that we can discern one additional consequence of comparative political theorists’ disavowal of Orientalism. Such a disavowal reinforces the impression that the project of CPT is somehow unprecedented in nature and is historically unique. Perhaps unwittingly, it also works to reimagine the past as more intolerant and inhospitable to other cultures than perhaps it was so that the present endeavor of CPT can emerge as more sensitive and tolerant in contrast to its historical other.

As Meghan Thomas rightly suggests, a recognition of the similarities between CPT and Orientalism would lead to a different understanding of the relationship between the two. Rather than conceive of the parochialism of late twentieth-century Western political thought as a legacy of Orientalism, following Thomas we might view this as a break from it. Reconceived in this fashion, CPT’s relationship to Orientalism

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33 Specifically, these similarities have to do with the ways in which Orientalists and CPT scholars respond to the encounter with difference. Thomas correctly identifies two such approaches. On the one hand, there is a strand of CPT scholarship (of which Dallmayr and Euben’s work is one example) that focuses on bringing out the commonalities between Western and non-Western thought. The upshot of emphasizing and revealing the parallels between diverse forms of political thought is that such an approach avoids the conclusion that cultures are incommensurable. In arguing that comparison yields commonalities, Thomas suggests that CPT scholars repeat an argument that was invoked by 19th century Orientalists such as Muller and Schlegel (2010, 665). A second approach focuses on highlighting differences rather than commonalities between Western and non-Western thought, and to suggest that such differences should be respected rather than simply dismissed. For example, CPT scholars have explored and sought to understand different conceptualizations of agency, subjectivity and freedom in the practice of veiling. The argument made by scholars who undertake this approach is that non-Western thought must be understood on its own terms, not judged by Western standards (Thomas 2010, 665-666). In taking this rout, comparative political theorists repeat important elements from William Jones’s approach to India, who argued that India ought to be ruled according to “traditional” Hindu and Muslim laws rather than according to the English system (ibid, 656). Aside from a shared preoccupation with texts, the greatest similarity between 18th and 19th century Orientalist scholarship and current work in CPT is that the latter has duplicated earlier Orientalists’ preoccupation with Indian, Chinese, and Islamic political thought.
gives rise to a new set of questions. For example, and as Meghan Thomas (2010, 673) puts it, “what occasioned that break, and when did it occur?” How was it possible that the fascination and enthusiasm for the “other” that characterized 18th and 19th century Orientalist studies could have been “so thoroughly forgotten, transformed, and unlearned” (Thomas 2010, 676), such that Fred Dallmayr would have to remind political theorists in the late 1990s to turn their attention to the forgotten East? (ibid, 673)

Building on Thomas’s argument, I suggest that framing one of the central concerns of the subfield of CPT as a search for an “exit” from Orientalism is unproductive as it leads us to ask the wrong questions. Instead, I argue that putting CPT scholars in conversation with one of their most immediate predecessors – namely, J.L. Mehta – can help us reconceive the dilemmas posed by Orientalism/Eurocentrism in a more productive way. I suggest that in Mehta’s distinctive response to Europeanization CPT scholars can find a way of reclaiming the forgotten legacy of Orientalism. It will be recalled that Mehta borrowed from Heidegger the notion of repetition, of bringing out the unthought in what had been thought by a past thinker as a way of freeing the Indian tradition from the Hegelian claim that Indian philosophy, conceived as inferior, had been incorporated and superseded by the West. Similarly, I suggest that CPT would be better served if it reconceives its relationship to the past not as an overcoming but as a repetition (understood in the Heideggerian sense).

At present, CPT has constituted its identity in a manner that resembles the Hegelian approach to the past. As I argued in the previous chapter, Hegel’s method of dialectical transcending is one of two broad approaches to the past. The other is Heidegger’s. While both Hegel and Heidegger recognized that philosophical thinking
necessarily involves a dialogue with the entire heritage of the past, Hegel’s approach focused on the dialectical surpassing of the thought of his predecessors into a higher unity. For Hegel, “the originary, the primitive, what stands at the beginning is less developed, to be overcome by the more developed and the richer.” I argue that a similar process is at work in CPT’s relationship to historical Orientalism. In seeking to distance itself from Orientalism, CPT has worked to portray Orientalism as its inferior “other” which, in turn, it has been able to overcome.

Unlike Hegel, Heidegger proposed repetition as a way of approaching the past, as a different way of gaining historical understanding. He believed that the meaning of the past is superabundant and that the past needs to be interpreted again and again. But to repeat the past, as Heidegger urged, is not to reenact specific historical occurrences, nor is it an eternal recurrence of the same. Rather, by repetition Heidegger referred to an act of “appropriation through which the past is reclaimed as possibility” (Schrag 1970, 289). Repetition, therefore, “occasions a reopening of the past by translating that which has been into possibilities to be chosen time and time again” (ibid). Repetition, Heidegger argued, hands over the past as a past that takes on meaning and may become understood. Without repetition the past would simply be a collection of meaningless, isolated facts (Schrag 1970, 289). As Calvin O. Schrag argues, we may think of repetition as an act of “redredging” through which one brings to the surface or releases new possibilities and meanings that have remained hidden in one’s tradition (ibid). It is crucial to note here that this is not an act of bringing the past back to life or of making the past coincide with the present. More accurately, it is a way of understanding the past rather than seeking identification with it (1970, 290).
CPT, I argue, stands to benefit if it “repeats” Orientalism along the lines suggested by Mehta’s creative reappropriation of Heidegger’s thesis of the Europeanization of the Earth. If CPT practitioners reconceive their relationship to the past along a Heideggerian framework, then this may provide an opening to reclaim and bring to the surface the latent possibilities of the Orientalist tradition that might otherwise remain buried. That is, to retrieve the part of the Orientalist project worth saving. Some of these possibilities have already been suggested in the work of J.J. Clarke who has persuasively shown that Orientalism was a many sided phenomenon that included a wide range of attitudes, “both light and dark,” toward the “Orient” (1997, 8). For Clarke, the Western interest in the Orient cannot fully be understood in terms of power and domination; nor can it fully be understood as an approach that displayed openness and good will towards non-Western cultures and traditions. “We have a right to be suspicious of the motives of Orientalism, and to underline its shortcomings,” Clarke writes, “but it does not follow from this that it is destitute of value or locked irretrievably in an imperialist past” (ibid, 218). Clarke’s attempt to understand the historical interest that the West has displayed for Eastern ideas by following the shifts and turns in the West’s encounter with Eastern traditions points the way to how a “redredging” of Orientalism might uncover new meanings and possibilities. In the section below, I point to three lacunae in existing CPT scholarship that suggest three areas from which new possibilities might be “released.”

**Three lacunae: encounter, travel, and power.** Despite their distinctive responses to Eurocentrism and Orientalism, Godrej and Jenco – but also Dallmayr and other comparative political thinkers – share a number of assumptions about the cross-
cultural encounter. Most importantly, these scholars take as given the fact that encounters with otherness (or with unfamiliar traditions of thought) exercise a profoundly disruptive influence on the self. Such disruptions, these theorists argue, are painful and can cause much discomfort. Nevertheless, we are made to understand that these disruptions are ultimately beneficial in that they are likely to produce profound transformations of self. Godrej, for example, casts the encounter with alterity in terms of a struggle, and seeks to make the case that only through grappling with the discomfort of encountering otherness – a discomfort heightened by one's physical self-dislocation to a foreign land – can theorists come to a more enhanced understanding of a given non-Western intellectual tradition (see Godrej 2011, 66). In a similar vein, Dallmayr argues that encounters with the unfamiliar can lead not only to greater tolerance of other cultures and their traditions of thought, but more importantly, to a “chastening of self” and the abandoning of the will to dominate. Finally, Jenco points us towards yet another outcome of the encounter, namely, conversion – arriving at the point where the theorist sees the life and thought of another culture as a personal alternative.

Despite differences in how they conceptualize the ultimate outcome of the encounter, all of these thinkers take for granted the fact that encounters with alterity are disturbing and disruptive. And yet, if all encounters with the unfamiliar produce uneasiness, then how can we understand Godrej’s earlier example regarding 18th century German and Anglo-Orientalist scholars? On her account, these scholars did not appear to be much disturbed by the encounter with Indian thought. In fact, the encounter served to reinforce, rather than disrupt, their sense of European exceptionalism. If travel and existential immersion do not always lead to heightened
appreciation of diverse values and cultures, if in fact they can sometimes have the 
opposite effect of actually increasing nationalist fervor, how can Godrej be so confident 
that the same fate will not befall the comparative political theorist? Godrej never 
explains what has changed in the intervening centuries to guarantee that CPT’s 
encounter with non-Western thought today will not result in the reaffirmation of one’s 
own values and culture. She, and other CPT scholars like Dallmayr, alert us to the 
possible risks (self-disruption) but not the motivations for the encounter with non-
Western traditions of thought. As I argued in chapter 2, the question of what motivates 
and drives Western interest in non-Western thought has hardly been thematized 
throughout the West’s long history of interaction with foreign cultures and traditions of 
thought. CPT scholars today continue to reproduce this silence.

I raise these concerns not to suggest that the enterprise of CPT should be 
abandoned, but because these questions point to a lacuna in the existing CPT 
literature, namely, an absence of sustained theoretical reflection on the cross-cultural 
encounter. Given the centrality and recurrence of the trope of encounter in CPT 
literature – indeed, it is used to describe anything from the encounter with non-Western 
texts and ideas to the encounter between cultures – this constitutes an important 
omission on the part of CPT scholarship. To be fair, in Beyond Orientalism Dallmayr 
distills seven different possibilities of cross-cultural encounter with a view towards 
establishing the normative primacy of dialogic exchange. Ranging from least desirable 
to most desirable, these modes of encounter include: conquest, conversion, 
assimilation/acculturation, partial assimilation/cultural borrowing, liberalism/minimal
engagement, conflict/class struggle, and dialogical engagement.\textsuperscript{34} Although Dallmayr offers a good starting point for thematizing the notion of encounter, like Godrej, he does not explain how CPT might guard itself from slipping into or perpetuating the less desirable modes of encounter.

Discussions about cross-cultural encounter necessarily entail an examination of travel (both in its literal and metaphorical sense). As I have shown, the metaphor of travel is central to the literature of CPT. But apart from its linkage to the Greek concept of \textit{theoria}, the metaphor of travel also remains undertheorized. One travels differently if one travels as a \textit{theoros}, a pilgrim, a nomad, a hero, a soldier, a missionary, or simply as a tourist.

Finally, my analysis in this chapter reveals a third gap in the literature: an unwillingness to acknowledge the inequality and power imbalance that characterizes cross-cultural encounters. For example, Jenco’s appeal to the phenomenon of “Western learning” as an exemplar of cross-cultural borrowing neglects to inform readers that this debate emerged in the aftermath of China’s defeat in the Opium Wars. While Jenco does explain that the debate turned around the proposal to adopt Western military and industrial technology as a way of strengthening China, she does not clarify the historical circumstances that led to Chinese thinkers’ recommendation for “Total Westernization.” Readers unfamiliar with this period of Chinese history might be left wondering why it was that at some point in the mid nineteenth century Chinese reformers began to urge their society to adopt Western institutions in order to achieve “wealth and power” (Jenco 2012, 93). This example problematizes the assumption that conversion and the

\textsuperscript{34} Dallmayr distills a number of these modes of encounter from Todorov’s \textit{The Conquest of America}.
adoption of another way of life are always a result of a personal choice rather than the consequence of some form of external coercion.

In sum, this chapter shows that the disavowal of Orientalism (conceived along Saidian lines) implicates CPT in an act of temporal othering, a sleight of hand whereby CPT scholars are led to reimagine the past as more intolerant and imperialist than it was so that, by comparison, the present can emerge as more culturally tolerant and interdependent. By working to establish its identity against a past so constructed, CPT implicitly portrays its project of fostering cross-cultural dialogue as somehow historically unique. In turn, this hides from view an important gap that emerges in current CPT work: an undertheorization of three concepts that are central to the way that CPT articulates its project – encounter, travel and power.
CHAPTER 5
PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS AND CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how a number of prominent CPT scholars have taken up Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, and examined Leigh Jenco’s and Farah Godrej’s respective proposals for deep immersion in local cultural contexts as an “exit” from the traps of Orientalism and Eurocentrism. In this chapter, I take a closer look at Fred Dallmayr and Roxanne Euben’s contributions to this debate. Both scholars find in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics the most appropriate model for encountering alien texts. Moreover, both view his dialogical approach as a powerful alternative to Orientalism and what they perceive as political theory’s parochialism. As Dallmayr argues, Gadamer’s insights can help us steer a course between “Eurocentrism” and “Euro-denial.” More importantly, Dallmayr argues, Gadamer’s hermeneutics can assist us in finding “the balance or ‘mid-point’ between self and other where alone dialogue can flourish” (Dallmayr 2002, 5).

Dallmayr’s invocation of dialogue should come as no surprise. As I have already suggested, one of the central ethical-political ambitions of CPT as a field of study is to foster a dialogue of cultures, or a dialogue among civilizations. For Dallmayr in particular, dialogue is the only way in which we can learn to live together peacefully in a deeply globalized world. “In the long run,” Dallmayr argues, “[dialogue] offers the only viable alternative to military confrontation with its ever-present danger of nuclear holocaust and global self-destruction” (2002, 13). Addressing the centrality of dialogue for CPT, Cary J. Nederman points out that scholars such as Dallmayr, Euben, and others who follow in their wake “embrace and endorse a single goal of intercultural
dialogue,” namely, a “fusion of horizons,” which aims at a form of mutual understanding that produces self-transformation on the part of those engaged in dialogue (Nederman 2009, 44). Dallmayr admits that dialogue is not the only mode of civilizational encounter, adding that historically it even appears to be one of the less likely modes of intercultural engagement. Nevertheless, he has sought to establish its normative primacy and preferability over conquest, missionary conversion, assimilation/acculturation, cultural borrowing, liberal neutralism, and class conflict (see Dallmayr 2002, 12-13; and Dallmayr 1996, 3-31).

My aim in this chapter is to explore the roots of CPT’s faith that dialogue can provide an antidote to Orientalism and the will to dominate. What is meant by dialogue? In which sense do CPT scholars use the term? If dialogue is possible only in conditions of equality, how should one proceed when such equality is absent? The chapter begins to answer these questions by foregrounding in some detail Dallmayr and Euben’s engagement with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. My aim here is not to challenge the “correctness” of their respective interpretations of Gadamer. Rather, in undertaking this task, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which both Euben and Dallmayr bring out the dialogic dimension of Gadamer’s argument, how they themselves put it into practice, and how they make the case for its relevance to CPT and cross-cultural studies more broadly.

While on the face of it dialogue appears to be self-evidently good, I argue that the concept remains undertheorized by comparative political theorists. My interpretive strategy of taking a closer look at Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and its appropriation by CPT scholars allows me to expand on the philosophical and political
importance of dialogue, as well as to question the possibility of genuine dialogue, especially when such dialogue occurs against the backdrop of immense economic and political inequalities. Let me also note here that although I take seriously CPT’s views on the normative value of the necessity for dialogue, I also draw attention to the less sanguine elements of the process of dialogue, those elements that comparative theorists have left unexplored. As Ashis Nandy (2004, 15) has suggested, dialogues need not always be egalitarian; they can also be hierarchical: “A culture with a developed, assertive language of dialogue often dominates the process of dialogue and uses the dialogue to cannibalize the culture with a low-key, muted, softer language of dialogue.” In such a scenario, dialogue, far from leading to mutual understanding, can threaten the integrity and survival of a culture.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section I offer an overview of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, focusing on six themes in his theory that are of particular relevance to comparative political theorists: prejudice, tradition, authority, openness, dialogue, and fusion of horizons. The second and third sections are devoted to tracing the ways in which Dallmayr and Euben have appropriated Gadamer's hermeneutics. Finally, in the last section I offer an example of a concrete hermeneutical encounter that both problematizes and broadens the notion of dialogue advanced by comparative political theorists.

**Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics**

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics represents a distinctive break from an earlier, classical tradition of hermeneutic theory associated with the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey among others. If in its earliest form hermeneutics was primarily associated with the practice of biblical exegesis and classical philology,
with these two writers hermeneutics developed into a more encompassing theory of textual interpretation devoted to recovering an author’s meaning regardless of the subject matter. Both Schleiermacher and Dilthey sought to provide a general hermeneutic methodology, a set of formalized rules of interpretation that could serve as the foundation for all kinds of text interpretation. Of the two thinkers, it is Schleiermacher who took the first decisive steps towards re-conceiving hermeneutics as a “science” or “art” of understanding. For the first time since its origins in biblical exegesis hermeneutics begins to define itself as the study of the nature and scope of the activity of understanding itself (Palmer 1969, 40). Extending hermeneutics to encompass not simply the understanding of written texts but also to the understanding of speech in general, Schleiermacher’s distinctive contribution consists in the emphasis he placed on understanding the individuality of the speaker/author. Schleiermacher defined hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstandings, and argued that understanding itself requires that we penetrate the psychology of the author, and gain access to the inner workings of an author’s mind (mens auctoris) through a reproduction of his original creative act (Gadamer 2004, 185, 186).

Dilthey follows Schleiermacher in conceiving of understanding as the process whereby one mind transposes itself and reconstructs the inner world of experience of another, but he rejected the psychology characteristic of Schleiermacher’s approach. For Dilthey, the interest was not so much in the other person, but in the human world itself – a world which he saw as fundamentally historical (Palmer 1969, 104). Dilthey repeatedly stressed that man is “an historical being,” and argued that human life and thought are embedded in tradition and history. He believed that man’s
self-understanding is dependent on history, and that as such it is necessarily historical (Palmer 1969, 116). Dilthey thought of life (or historical reality) as a text that must yield its meanings and has to be understood. Life itself, he claimed, is hermeneutical. In addition to transposing hermeneutics to the study of history, one of Dilthey’s central contributions was “to broaden the horizon of hermeneutics by placing it in the context of interpretation in the human [sciences]” (ibid, 121). He rejected the methods of the natural sciences as inapplicable to the study of human life, and sought to establish hermeneutics as the foundational method for the social and human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften). Despite his contribution in broadening the scope of hermeneutics, Dilthey’s aspiration to have the study of history be recognized as a “science” on par with the natural sciences, ultimately prevented him from fully extricating himself from the “scientism and objectivity” of the Historical School which he had sought to transcend (ibid, 123).

Before the arrival of Heidegger and Gadamer, the problem of hermeneutics was fundamentally methodological. Since the methods of the natural sciences were deemed incapable of accessing that dimension of experience “in which a truth is disclosed to us and an awareness of reality is made available to us through the vehicle of tradition,” the task at hand for this earlier hermeneutic tradition was to find an alternative methodology that would be able to access the experience of philosophy, the experience of art, and the experience of history itself (Mehta 1985, 140; Gadamer 2004, xxi). If Schleiermacher and Dilthey were ultimately preoccupied with establishing a method that could provide correct, objective, and even universally valid knowledge and interpretations, with Heidegger hermeneutics takes a radical turn.
While I cannot do justice to the depth and complexity of Heidegger’s thinking, it suffices to say that one of his central contributions to hermeneutic theory revolves around his distinctive definition of understanding. Departing from Dilthey, for Heidegger understanding is no longer conceived as a methodological concept or a mode of knowing distinct from scientific explanation and specific to the human sciences alone. It is not a tool to be used or something to be possessed. Rather, understanding “is conceived as the primordial mode of being of human life itself” (Mehta 1985, 151). It is a constituent element of our being-in-the-world (ibid, 150). In this deeper sense, then, understanding is not a passive awareness or detached contemplation of the world “out there” but involves “the power to grasp one’s own possibility for being within the context of the everyday world in which one exists” (Steele 1997, 10). To “be” is to understand.

For Heidegger, mind and world are not ontologically separate; rather, we are always already historically and existentially situated in the world such that there is no outside space from which we can examine the mind or contemplate our human practices. An important feature of this transcendental account of understanding is that it always operates within a “fabric of relationships,” a relational whole (Palmer 1969, 134). To understand, therefore, is to always be involved in the unending interplay of the whole (tradition) and the part, i.e., the presuppositions with which the interpreter approaches the whole (Mehta 1985, 154). Claiming that there is no such thing as presuppositionless understanding, Heidegger embraces a view of human understanding that is inseparable from our situatedness. Going beyond Schleiermacher and Dilthey, with Heidegger understanding becomes ontological and linguistic.
With the publication of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* in 1960, hermeneutic theory enters an important new phase. Following the lead of Heidegger, Gadamer expanded on his teacher’s insights to develop his own distinctive philosophical hermeneutics. Rather than attempt an exhaustive treatment of Gadamer’s work, I isolate those elements of his theory that are useful in understanding the dialogical dimension of philosophical hermeneutics and its relevance for cross-cultural learning more broadly. To this end, I focus on the following themes: tradition, authority, prejudice, fusion of horizons, dialogue, and openness.

**Rehabilitating the Concepts of Prejudice, Authority, and Tradition**

At the outset it is important to understand that, unlike the tradition of classical hermeneutics, Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* is not concerned with the practical task of elaborating a general system of rules to describe the proper methods of interpretation in the human sciences. Instead, his central aim is to “discover what is common to all modes of understanding” (2004, xxviii). Asking the question “how is understanding possible?” (ibid, xxvii), Gadamer’s study is concerned with shedding light on the phenomenon of understanding itself, not just as it is applicable to the humanities but for the whole of our experience in the world.

One relatively simple way to enter into Gadamer’s thought is to note that he developed his hermeneutic philosophy to address the challenge of how we may understand the meaning of texts that are historically distant from us. As Lauren Barthold (2010, xiii) observes, “[f]rom its earliest days hermeneutics has concerned itself with distance: how are we to cope with the divide between the alien and the familiar?” Building on Heidegger’s insight that mind and world are not ontologically separate, Gadamer argued that every interpreter is always already situated within a particular
tradition that cannot be set aside, and from within which she approaches any given text. Taking issue with the legacy of Cartesian inspired approaches that posit a neutral observer capable of suspending her “prejudices” in pursuit of “objective knowledge,” Gadamer sought to retrieve a positive conception of prejudice as “prejudgment”\(^1\) and argued that prejudice, so defined, plays a central role in understanding:

A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings (Gadamer 2004, 271).

Following Heidegger, Gadamer similarly maintains that there can be no presuppositionless interpretation and understanding. Countering the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudice” (ibid, 273) and prevailing notions that prejudices necessarily exercise a restrictive influence upon our thinking, Gadamer argues that prejudgments are in fact a necessary condition for understanding (ibid, 278). To get a better grasp of the central role that the concept of prejudice plays in Gadamer’s thought, we must explore two other concepts that Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate: tradition and authority. Like Heidegger, Gadamer likewise asserts that we are more than just observers in the world. Rather, we are always already situated within, and participate, in a given tradition that is also the source of our prejudices. As something that is always part of us, tradition both conditions and is the condition for our understanding. Tradition for Gadamer, writes Richard Palmer, is like “a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding. [It] is not over and against us, but something in which we

\(^1\) Specifically, Gadamer defines prejudice as “a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined” (2004, 273).
stand and through which we exist; [...] it is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to us – as invisible as water is to fish” (Palmer 1969, 177). This is what Gadamer calls the “authority” of tradition. When comparative political theorists invoke Gadamer to speak about Western thinkers’ “rootedness” in a tradition, this is what they have in mind.

If tradition is invisible to us in the sense just described, how can we ever become aware of our prejudices or prejudgments for which tradition is the source? Here we must note that Gadamer distinguished between “true” or fruitful presuppositions that enable understanding and “false” prejudices that can lead to misunderstanding, that can prevent us from seeing and thinking (Gadamer 2004, 298). Crucially, he insisted that the only way we can come to understand which of our prejudices are “blind” and which of them are productive of understanding is by “testing” them through an encounter with otherness (the otherness of tradition, the otherness of a text, etc.). As Gadamer explains, “It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditionary text can provide this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be

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2 As Gadamer writes, “That which has been sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority that is nameless, and our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us [...] always has power over our attitudes and behavior. All education depends on this, and even though, in the case of education, the educator loses his function when his charge comes of age and sets his own sight and decision in the place of the authority of the educator, becoming mature does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he is freed from all tradition” (2004, 281-282). Challenging Enlightenment conceptions that posit authority (and tradition) as the diametrical opposites of freedom and reason, Gadamer sought to rehabilitate a notion of authority that is not synonymous with passive and blind obedience. He argues that true authority always involves active acknowledgement by others. It is therefore an act of reason. In other words, Gadamer wants to say that tradition (and authority) always contains within it an element of choice. Even the preservation of tradition, according to Gadamer, is an act of choice based on reason. Although Gadamer argues that tradition is something into which we are born and that shapes our understanding, he also insists that tradition is something in which we also participate and help to produce. As such, tradition carries our imprint. For Gadamer, an acknowledgement of tradition and authority, therefore, is not a call for blind obedience; rather it is a call for an active reflection on the meaning of that authority for ourselves. Tradition, on this view, is an ongoing, living dynamic in which the past and present are constantly mediated.
something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity” (Gadamer 2004, 298). It is only when something address us in this way, Gadamer argues, that understanding can begin.

**The Conditions for Understanding: Openness, Dialogue, and the Fusion of Horizons**

The encounter between an interpreter (her prejudices) and the traditionary text, or simply the encounter with otherness, initiates a process of question and answer. The text “addresses,” “tells,” or “says” something to us, and this is experienced as a “question” by the interpreter. While the encounter alone does not lead to understanding, it is a crucial component of the process of interpretation because it means that an opening for dialogue has occurred. As Gadamer writes, “Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us” (1976, 9). Our prejudices or presuppositions, in being “provoked” by the encounter, open us up “for the new, the different, the true” (ibid). The encounter, in effect, is what allows our prejudices to become visible to us; it allows us to foreground and expose our prejudgments both to our own doubt as well as to the rejoinder of the other (Gadamer 1989, 26). In becoming apparent to us through the encounter, our prejudices can in turn become the focus of questioning – both self-questioning and questioning by the other. As Gadamer writes, “prejudice[s] become questionable in view of what another person or a text says to us”

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3 As Gadamer writes, “That a historical text is made the object of interpretation means that it puts a question to the interpreter. Thus interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter. To understand a text means to understand this question” (Gadamer 2004, 363). Gadamer’s emphasis on the priority of the question in the structure of understanding is something that he borrows from the work of Plato and R. G. Collingwood.
This means that they are capable of being modified, revised, and potentially discarded.

If the encounter with the unfamiliar is what provides the opening for dialogue, it is in the process of dialogue itself that understanding can occur. Gadamer invokes the model of dialogue or conversation to argue that understanding is the dialogic interaction between the reader and the text where co-creation of meaning occurs. “To reach an understanding in dialogue,” Gadamer writes, “is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communication in which we do not remain what we were” (2004, 371). In his *Truth and Method*, the interpreter and the text assume the role of partners in a dialogue, where the goal is to reach some kind of accord concerning the matter at hand: “Just as each interlocutor is trying to reach agreement on some subject with his partner, so also the interpreter is trying to understand what the text is saying” (Gadamer 2004, 370).

That which enables us to understand the text or the “other” is what Gadamer calls our *horizon*. As he defines it, the horizon “is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (ibid, 301). It is the larger context of meaning within which we are situated, and suggests the localized, perspectival nature of knowing. To have a horizon, Gadamer explains, “means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it” (ibid). Rather than think of this horizon, of which our prejudices are a crucial part, as a prison from which there is no escape, Gadamer emphasizes that the horizon can never be truly closed; rather, it “is something within which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving” (ibid, 303). While a horizon is limited and finite in the same
sense that each human life is also finite, Gadamer insists that our horizon is nevertheless open, fluid, and changing (2004, 303).

The aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that is of particular interests to comparative political theorists can be brought to light once we pose the question of what happens when we try to understand a horizon that is other than our own. In so far as understanding can be seen as a process of coming to an agreement about a subject matter, Gadamer describes the process of coming into contact with another horizon as oriented toward achieving a “fusion of horizons.” It is important to note that Gadamer’s discussion of the horizon occurs in the section of *Truth and Method* devoted to explaining how we can come to understand the relationship between the interpreter and the text, or the present (which we inhabit) and the past (the tradition within which we place ourselves). “Are there really two different horizons here,” Gadamer asks, “the horizon within which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon within which he places himself?” (2004, 303). For Gadamer, we would be wrong in assuming that the ability of an interpreter to understand a text from the past depends on her capacity to transpose herself into this distinct, alien horizon. What Gadamer seeks to establish is that the horizon of the present and that of the past are not entirely separate; rather, there is continuity between them. When we transpose ourselves into historical horizons, he writes,

[T]his does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in the historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon. Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always
lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition (Gadamer 2004, 303).

To understand an alien tradition requires that we have a historical horizon. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by an act of empathic transposition into a historical tradition. As Gadamer makes clear, we are always already situated within a horizon of meaning that allows us to transpose ourselves into another, alien tradition. When we attempt to understand a historically distant text, we move into its horizon while simultaneously bringing our horizon with us. Gadamer describes this process as akin to putting ourselves into someone else’s shoes. It is only by placing ourselves (together with our horizon) in another’s situation that we can “become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person” (ibid, 304). Transposing ourselves in this sense is not an act of empathy but “involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our particularity but also that of the other” (ibid). Applied to this context, the concept of horizon “expresses the superior breath of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have” (ibid). As Gadamer elaborates, “to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and its truer proportion” (ibid).

The attempt to understand the other, therefore, necessarily throws us back upon ourselves, to a reexamination of our presuppositions and historical tradition. This to and fro movement between self and other, between our present and the heritage of our past, leads to a deepening and widening of our horizon and, in the process, both self and other are transformed.

In rejecting the existence of ontologically closed, distinct, or reified horizons, Gadamer thereby also disallows the possibility of incommensurability and affirms the
intrinsic openness of the hermeneutical experience. If the historical horizon is fluid so too is the horizon of the present. As Gadamer explains,

The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons, which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding itself is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves (Gadamer 2004, 305; emphasis in original).

But why speak of a fusion of horizons if there is no such thing as isolated, distinct horizons? As Gadamer asks, why not simply speak of the formation of a single horizon “whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition?” (ibid, 305) Every encounter with tradition, Gadamer explains, “involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present” (ibid). Elsewhere in Truth and Method Gadamer describes this tension as the polarity between familiarity and strangeness (ibid, 295). The task of hermeneutics is to consciously bring out this tension, this in-betweenness, not to conceal it “by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two” (ibid, 305). This is why, Gadamer elaborates, “it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present” (ibid). And as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded by our present horizon (ibid, 306). By projection Gadamer here means the conscious act of reconstructing the past. Consciousness of the present, however, is inseparable from and requires consciousness of tradition – that is an awareness of the way in which the past is contained in the present. This movement of projecting and superseding is another way of describing the process of understanding. It is in this sense that understanding can be said to involve a “fusion” of horizons. Stated differently, fusion, in this sense, refers to the active and ongoing nature of
understanding, not to a static process. It refers to the creation of a common language of meaning that emerges between the interpreter and the text, between self and other, between past and present.

The upshot of Gadamer’s dialogic mode for comparative political theory is that it places the interpreter in an attitude of openness towards the alien tradition. “Hermeneutical experience,” Gadamer reiterates, “is concerned with tradition. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is language – i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou” (Gadamer 2004, 352; emphases in original). A Thou, Gadamer reminds us, is not an object but always stands in a certain relationship with us. In other words, for Gadamer the relationship between past and present (or between historically effected consciousness and tradition) has an analogue in the I-Thou relationship.4

Gadamer delineates three ways in which we experience or relate to the Thou. In the first I-Thou relationship the Thou is seen and experienced in an instrumental way, as an object that can serve as a means to achieving our ends. Applying this to the hermeneutical relation to tradition, according to Gadamer this orientation towards the other easily leads us to a “naïve faith in method and in the objectivity that can be attained through it” (2004, 352). That is, it leads us to view tradition (the other) as a discrete object, completely detached and unrelated to us and, in turn, also unaffected by us. On this model, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we can adequately grasp the other by methodically excluding all subjective moments of relation to and involvement with this tradition.

4 This is not to be equated with Martin Buber’s I-Thou relationship.
A second way of experiencing and relating to the Thou sees the Thou as a person, but as Gadamer shows, this ostensibly non-instrumental mode of relating to the other can still remain imprisoned in the I. This relationship is “not immediate but reflective,” and is characterized by claims and counterclaims. In such a relationship, Gadamer explains,

[O]ne claims to know the other’s claim from his point of view and even to understand the other better than the other understands himself. In this way the Thou loses the immediacy with which it makes its claim. It is understood, but this means it is co-opted and pre-empted reflectively from the standpoint of the other person (Gadamer 2004, 353).

This struggle for mutual recognition, Gadamer argues, can lead to the complete domination of one person by the other. As Gadamer asserts, “it is an illusion to see another person as a tool that can be absolutely known and used” (ibid, 353). In claiming to know the other better than the other knows herself, in claiming to be objective and prejudice-free, Gadamer shows that the interpreter is really claiming to be master of the situation:

A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as a vis a tergo. A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light. It is like the relation between the I and Thou. A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond. A person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition in exactly the same way (ibid, 354).

To this form of psychological orientation to the other Gadamer contrasts a third kind of I-Thou relationship, one characterized by a genuine openness to the Thou. In human relationships, Gadamer argues, “the important thing is […] to experience the Thou truly as Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is
where openness belongs” (2004, 355). This openness, Gadamer clarifies, does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, “anyone who listens is fundamentally open” (ibid). In this relationship, the I does not project its meaning on the Thou but lets the Thou address her. This mode of orientation to the other implies an openness that “wills to hear rather than to master.” It is an openness that recognizes the possibility of being challenged, modified or transformed by the other. As Gadamer eloquently writes, “One must lose oneself in order to find oneself.” Importantly, “one never knows in advance what one will find oneself to be” (Gadamer 1989, 57).

The strong emphasis on non-mastery and non-domination that emerges from this account of the relationship between self and other is what comparative political theorists find attractive about Gadamer’s approach. In this account, as Richard Palmer summarizes, the interpreter emerges not as one who “masters” what is in the text but as one who becomes the “servant” of the text. The interpreter “does not so much try to observe and see what is in the text as to follow, participate in, and ‘hear’ what is said by the text” (Palmer 1969, 208). On this view therefore – a view that I argue is also shared by proponents of CPT – Gadamer’s hermeneutics emerges as an approach that is geared towards restraining or chastening the interpreter’s “will to master.” As such, we can begin to see how Gadamer’s insistence that an interpreter should remain open to the voice of the other begins to lead us away from Orientalism and its hegemonic posture towards non-Western thought traditions.

While Gadamer’s approach might be helpful in pointing to a way out of Orientalism, the element of his account that CPT scholars uncritically adopt is Gadamer’s portrayal of dialogue as the necessary opposite of domination. In the
previous chapter I showed that comparative political theorists uncritically disavow 
Orientalism because they understand it only in its pejorative connotation. In the 
following sections, I show that the corollary of the disavowal of Orientalism is the 
uncritical embrace of dialogue as the obvious antidote to Orientalism’s hegemonic mode 
of approaching other cultures. This is because CPT scholars primarily view dialogue as 
an egalitarian model that helps us steer a course between assimilation and exclusion of 
“other” voices. Just as the narrow understanding of Orientalism leads CPT scholars to 
perform an act of temporal othering that severs them from their precursors, so too the 
uncritical embrace of a Gadamerian notion of dialogue leads them to the conclusion that 
a commitment to dialogue will necessarily issue in more sympathetic and enhanced 
understanding of non-Western traditions of thought. My aim is to problematize this 
assumption by highlighting the ways in which dialogue may not always remain free from 
power and as such is not always non-dominative. To set the stage for my critical 
intervention, in the next two sections I outline Dallmayr and Euben’s respective 
engagements with Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

Dallmayr’s Reading of Gadamer: The Relevance of Hermeneutics for Cross-
Cultural Studies

Not all readers might be immediately convinced about the applicability of 
Gadamerian hermeneutics to the context of cross-cultural interaction and exchange. 
Recall that in *Truth and Method* Gadamer is primarily concerned with bridging temporal 
rather than cultural or spatial distance between text and interpreter. That is to say, when 
Gadamer is describing the process of understanding, he strongly implies that the 
tradition to be understood and the understanding subject are the same. Text and 
interpreter are located within a single, continuous tradition, and hence find themselves
within a common horizon of meaning. As many commentators recognize, the tradition that Gadamer has in mind is his own European culture. Peter Haidu (1990, 679), for example, notes that, as a product of European intellectual history, Gadamer’s hermeneutics confines itself to a “purely European diachrony.” In the context of cross-cultural encounter, however, we are dealing with a situation in which interpreter and text are separated by geographical as well as temporal distance.

Both Panikkar and Godrej, for example, view the Gadamerian model as insufficient when it comes to understanding texts that emanate from different cultural traditions. Godrej’s example of the interpretive difficulties Western scholars might face when confronted with the concept of dharma that I discussed in the previous chapter is meant to illustrate the limits of Gadamerian hermeneutics. Recall that for Godrej, the “prejudices” that a Western trained political theorist might bring to this concept – in this case, by drawing parallels to Aquinas’s notion of natural law – will lead her to fundamentally misunderstand the term. As I demonstrated in the previous two chapters, it is precisely as a remedy to this shortcoming of Gadamer’s hermeneutics that both Godrej and Panikkar propose deep immersion in the life-worlds of radically alien traditions – traditions with which, for whatever reason, we have not been able to develop direct cultural or historical links.5 Lastly, in his last public lecture delivered in 1988 at the Center for Study of World Religions, J.L. Mehta noted that the chief virtue of philosophical hermeneutics lies in “clarifying the nature of self-understanding” and suggested that it is less helpful when it comes to an understanding of others.

Notwithstanding these critiques, other scholars such as Wilhelm Halbfass have argued that there is no compelling reason why Gadamer’s hermeneutic concepts should not be applicable “in a wider, trans-cultural context” (1988, 165). For Halbfass, the access to foreign traditions of thought may be viewed simply as “an extreme case of hermeneutical difficulty” analogous to the challenges one encounters when confronting texts written in a foreign language (Gadamer quoted in Halbfass 1988, 165). Fred Dallmayr is also among those who do not see any reason why Gadamer’s model should be inapplicable to endeavors geared towards cross-cultural learning. In some of his more recent work, which I explore below, Dallmayr tackles the question of whether hermeneutic interpretation can be transferred from the reading of texts to the domain of cross-cultural encounters. To fully appreciate Dallmayr’s contribution, I outline his attempt to rescue Gadamer from charges that his theory is ultimately unable to accommodate the thought of radical alterity (see, for example, Haidu 1990; Bernasconi 1995).

**In Defense of Gadamer**

One of Dallmayr’s first extended elaborations on the significance of Gadamerian hermeneutics to cross-cultural studies – and comparative political theory in particular – appears in his *Beyond Orientalism*. Rather than offer a comprehensive exegesis of Gadamer’s magisterial *Truth and Method*, Dallmayr shifts the focus of attention to some of Gadamer’s later work in which we can find his reflections and commentaries on “larger global and geocultural concerns” (1996, 40). The explicit focus on this dimension of Gadamer’s work has as its goal the task of clarifying how philosophical hermeneutics

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6 See also Charles Taylor and Richard Bernstein.
can be extended to the realm of contemporary cross-cultural encounters. As Dallmayr notes, “Gadamer has persistently reflected and commented on the significance of European (or Western) culture, alerting readers both to its intrinsic grandeur and to its tragedy of impossible limitations” (ibid). Reading Gadamer alongside Jacques Derrida’s late reflections on Europe in *The Other Heading*, Dallmayr discovers in their work the groundwork for a “hermeneutics of difference” – a hermeneutics that can serve as the foundation “for the emerging global city and a dialogically constructed global ecumenicism” (ibid).

Dallmayr acknowledges the presence of a kind of linguistic idealism in Gadamer’s work up until and including the publication of his *Truth and Method*. Here Dallmayr is essentially referring to one of the most common critiques leveled at Gadamer’s dialogical hermeneutics, namely, the reliance on an implicit consensualism necessary for the eventual “fusion of horizons” between self and other, or reader and text, where alterity is ultimately overcome in favor of reaching some kind of harmonious agreement devoid of any conflict (ibid, 41; Dallmayr 2009, 27). As Robert Bernasconi has articulated this problem, “it is not clear whether Gadamer succeeds in freeing himself from the prejudice of representing difference or otherness as a problem to be resolved” or overcome (1995, 180). If the strange or the foreign is the initial precondition that sets the process of understanding in motion, there is a tendency in Gadamer’s theory to reduce alterity to a moment that is to be overcome in the search for a fusion of horizons. Bernasconi notes that Gadamer’s treatment of alterity has led to charges that the model of dialogue he elaborates is monological rather than dialogical (ibid, 186).
While Dallmayr is sensitive to these charges, he believes that in many respects they are misleading and do not do justice to the complexity of Gadamerian hermeneutics. On Dallmayr’s account, a number of experiences contributed to Gadamer’s modification of his hermeneutic theory. Among the most formative Dallmayr identifies Gadamer’s turn to Heidegger’s later writings, his engagement with French post-structuralism, and his turn to the poetry of Paul Celan. Gadamer’s engagement with these traditions of thought led in his later writings to a “steady distanation from fusionism in favor of a stronger recognition of otherness in the context of reciprocal encounter” (1996, 32).

Turning to Gadamer’s late work on the poetry of Paul Celan, Dallmayr suggests that here readers can find a direct acknowledgement on Gadamer’s part of the non-transparency of language which can lead to a rupture or failure of (complete) understanding. If *Truth and Method* displays a tendency towards consensualism, Gadamer’s reading of Celan reveals a greater attentiveness to the “ambiguity, multivocity, and indeterminacy unleashed by the poetic text” (ibid, 44). Ruminating on the task of the interpreter when confronted with the hermetic poetry of Celan – a poetry which Celan himself described as a “message in a bottle”, implying that it is entirely up to the reader to decode that message and even to determine whether the bottle contains any message at all – Gadamer approached Celan’s poems by respecting their poetic distance. In Gadamer’s response to the otherness of Celan’s texts Dallmayr finds “a willingness to refrain from willful penetration, that is, a readiness to leave blank spaces intact and thus to honor the interlacing of said and unsaid and of word and silence” (ibid, ix).
In his later work, then, Gadamer acknowledges the possibility of non-communication (or ruptured communication) by highlighting the difficulties of reaching understanding. But the recognition that understanding can be disrupted or impeded is already present in his *Truth and Method*. As Dallmayr points out, there are two “limits or boundaries of conversational understanding in Gadamer’s treatment” (1984, 199). The first of these limits becomes evident in those cases where “the effort at understanding is lacking or insufficiently developed,” or where there is no desire to reach understanding in the first place (ibid). For example, this occurs when the partners in dialogue, because of indifference or haste, are not concerned with promoting a true “I-Thou” relationship. In such instances communication is reduced to idle chatter where conversational exchanges consist of nothing more than the exchange of clichés and linguistic stereotypes. According to Dallmayr, this type of interpersonal indifference is also evident in scientific inquiry, where ordinary language is replaced by an artificial or technological idiom (ibid, 199-200).

The second limit case becomes apparent in those situations where the desire to reach understanding is not lacking, but where there is difficulty in reaching it due to “the intricacy of an explored topic or from unfamiliarity with a given language” (ibid, 200). As Gadamer himself states, it is precisely “in situations where coming to an understanding is disrupted or impeded [that] we first become conscious of the conditions of all understanding” (2004, 386). The encounter with a foreign-language text presents a special kind of barrier to understanding the overcoming of which necessitates the presence of a translator. In translation, there is always a gap between “the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction”, a gap which can never be completely
closed (Gadamer 2004, 386). As Gadamer correctly points out, “even the most faithful translation cannot remove the fundamental gulf between the two languages” (ibid, 387). At every step of the translation process the interpreter is faced with difficult decisions. If a translator should choose to highlight a particular dimension of the text under examination, this means that she is simultaneously required to downplay other features of the text. This process of highlighting and downplaying is ongoing and continuous, and occurs even in those “borderline cases” where “something is in fact unclear” to the translator (Gadamer 2004, 388). As Gadamer explains, in such situations where there is lack of clarity (and lack of understanding), the interpreter is nonetheless required “to state how he understands” a given passage, text, etc (ibid). At the same time, however, since the translator “is always in the position of not being able to express all the dimensions of [the] text, [she] must make a constant renunciation” (ibid).

Gadamer is right to highlight the fact that “every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original. Even if it is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original” (ibid). Yet as Dallmayr points out, despite the fact that the distance between the original and its translation appears unbridgeable, ultimately for Gadamer “translation presents no absolute bar to understanding and only highlights general hermeneutical dilemmas” (Dallmayr 1984, 200). On Dallmayr’s account, rather than translation Gadamer viewed poetry or poetic language as a more extreme type of unfamiliarity and an obstacle to understanding. Gadamer defines poetry “not as a mode of representation or description, but as a mode of disclosure ‘opening up a world of the divine and human’ or a ‘new
vision of the world” (ibid). But just as was the case with translation, in *Truth and Method* Gadamer ultimately downplays “the innovative and radically unfamiliar character of poetry” suggesting instead that the “poetic word” is just an “intensification of everyday speech” (quoted in Dallmayr 1984, 200).

Against this background, we gain a clearer picture of how Gadamer refined his understanding of poetry and poetic exegesis in his later work on Paul Celan. On Dallmayr’s reading, the engagement with the “hermetic nonexpressiveness” of Celan’s poems led to a modification of Gadamer’s notion of understanding. Gone is the emphasis on a harmonious fusion of horizons; in its place is a greater attentiveness to the obstacles that impede communication. In the case of Celan’s work, these obstacles include the interpreter’s (reader’s) confrontation with a type of poetry that is cryptic, impenetrable, and full of idioms and manipulations of the German language. How does one translate, how does one understand the impenetrable? Indeed, how does one engage with a poetry that “approaches…the breathless stillness of silence in the word turned cryptic cipher?” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 42).

Gadamer counseled that on such occasions the reader must display a willingness to listen to the “breathless stillness of the word” (Dallmayr 1996, 42). At the same time, Gadamer also cautioned that sensitivity to the opacity of texts need not

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7 Dallmayr makes reference to Heidegger’s work in order to bring into sharper relief the boundary cases invoked by Gadamer. Specifically, Dallmayr draws attention to Heidegger’s notion of conventional or inauthentic mode of communication, which he labeled “idle talk” or “chatter” and which he used to denote those instances when individuals communicate via the repetition of clichés. Secondly, Dallmayr elaborates on Heidegger’s understanding of poetry. As he explains, Heidegger placed emphasis on the “the undomesticated and unconventional character of the poetic idiom and its special openness or vulnerability” (Dallmayr 1984, 201). According to Heidegger, the central vocation of the poet is “to guard the word as the disclosure or font of being” (Heidegger quoted in Gadamer 1984, 201). By contrast, he described everyday language as “a forgotten and therefore used-up poem” (ibid). We can clearly see Gadamer’s debt to Heidegger here.
mean that we must abandon the search for understanding. On the contrary, as Dallmayr points out, Gadamer sought to steer a path between understanding and non-understanding, or between complete appropriation and renunciation – i.e., a middle course that would be sensitive to the silences of language and leave “blank spaces intact” (1996, 44). As Dallmayr interprets him, Gadamer did not simply wish to advocate the renunciation of understanding when confronted with the impenetrability of Celan’s poetry. For Gadamer it is not enough “merely to register the failure or rupture of understanding; rather, what is needed is an attempt to look for possible points of entry and then to inquire in which manner and how far understanding may be able to penetrate” (Dallmayr 1996: 44). The goal of this type of interpretation “is not to render transparent what is (and must remain) concealed, but rather to comprehend and respect the complex interlacing of transparency and non-transparency in poetic texts” (ibid.).

For Dallmayr, Gadamer’s approach to the poetry of Celan and his emphasis on “interpretive perseverance” is instructive as it both advocates and reflects a “disposition or a ‘good will’ to understanding, [i.e.] a disinclination to let rupture or estrangement have the last word” (ibid, 44-5). What Dallmayr finds valuable about Gadamer’s hermeneutical engagement with Celan is not only his emphasis on the importance of

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8 "The objective is not to discern or pinpoint the univocity of the poet’s intent; not by any means. Nor is it a matter of determining the univocity of the ‘meaning’ expressed in the poem itself. Rather what is involved is attentiveness to the ambiguity, multivocity, and indeterminacy unleashed by the poetic text – a multivocity which does not furnish a blank check to the license of the reader, but rather constitutes the very target of the hermeneutical struggle demanded by the text” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 44).

9 There has been some debate about the meaning of “good will” as Gadamer employs the term. In a famous exchange with the German philosopher, Jacques Derrida suggested that the positing of a Kantian notion of good will commits Gadamer to a “metaphysics of the will” (1989, 53). In other words, Derrida argued that Gadamer overlooks the element of domination that the appeal to the notion of good will brings to a given text (see also Risser 1989,183). In his response to this charge, Gadamer countered that the effort to understand another person or text has nothing to do with the Kantian concept of good will. Rather, when invoking the notion of good will Gadamer has in mind what Plato called “eumeneis elenchoi” (ευμενεις ελενχοι) – the hermeneutical attitude of openness.
being attentive to the “said” as well as to the “unsaid,” but also the fact that in his later work Gadamer “tends to underscore [the] embeddedness in a common world” of readers and texts (ibid, 45). This is important, Dallmayr argues, as it suggests that Gadamer ultimately does not endorse a radical, unbridgeable separation between interpreters and texts. Instead he develops a notion of understanding where exegesis is now understood as a kind of “struggle or […] agonistic engagement, proceeding along the pathway not so much of a pre-established consensus but of something like an “agonistic dialogue” (ibid, 45).

While Gadamer makes much of the fact that “interpretive honesty” demands that in those instances when one is confronted with the radical otherness of a text it is preferable to admit that one does not understand, he does not seek to elevate non-understanding into a general maxim nor to endorse a subjective relativism. Rather, in response to some of his critics Gadamer sought to refine his theory of understanding by re-elaborating hermeneutics as a type of “agonal engagement” or an “engaged dialogical encounter” (ibid, 49). Gadamer likens the type of dialogic encounter he has in mind to the Socratic method of self-reflection through questioning and mutual contestation. In Socrates Gadamer finds an approach to hermeneutic inquiry which counsels that one must seek to understand the other even at the risk of self-critique; given that all understanding involves a kind of stepping outside oneself and a movement towards the other, an agonal engagement entails that one must be willing to admit that one could be in the wrong and, by extension, that the other could be right (ibid, 48-9).

The Legacy of Europe

Viewed as an agonal engagement, Gadamer’s hermeneutics has resonance beyond the realm of textual interpretation. As Dallmayr suggests, Gadamer’s “later
writings on hermeneutical understanding are pertinent to our emerging ‘global city,’ to an incipient world order marked by a contestation among cultures and by a growing resistance to one-sided Western hegemony” (1996, 49). Dallmayr distills Gadamer’s views on the socio-political significance of contemporary cross-cultural encounters from *The Legacy of Europe* (*Das Erbe Europas*), a study published almost a decade after Gadamer’s encounter with Derrida. In these essays, Gadamer concerned himself with the status and role of Europe in the emerging context of globalization and European unification. Europe, he said, was now “intimately inserted and implicated in ‘world events’” and haunted by the same global dangers facing the rest of humanity, including nuclear catastrophe and ecological disaster (ibid, 50).

For instance, Gadamer argued that nature could no longer be viewed as an object of exploitation or as something that is radically external to us. Instead, “it must be experienced as our partner…as the ‘other’ sharing our habitat,” or as the “other of ourselves (quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 52). For Dallmayr, Gadamer’s reflections on the relationship between human beings and nature have great significance in the realm of

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10 It is interesting to note that Dallmayr himself invokes a similar rationale to contextualize and make a case for the need for comparative political theory. In an article primarily addressed to his American political theory colleagues, “Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory”, Dallmayr observed that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had served as a wake-up call, bringing into sharper relief the Western-centered focus of political theory panels at academic conferences and “the fact that the [United States] is inexorably part of the globalizing world” (Dallmayr 2004, 250). For Dallmayr, in the aftermath of 9/11 political theory’s (and academia’s) aloofness from world events could no longer be maintained. Roughly a decade after Jeffrey Isaac pondered the “strange silence of political theory” vis-à-vis unfolding political events, Fred Dallmayr urged political theorists to examine whether the field was “properly attentive to the ‘burning’ issues of our time,” including terrorist attacks, ethnic cleansing, the looming ecological crisis, the threat of nuclear disaster, the erosion of sovereignty and new forms of global inequalities as a result of expanding markets. Worried about what he perceived to be theory’s detachment from the world, Dallmayr forcefully argued that what is needed today are novel ways of imagining and cultivating “new cross-cultural or even inter-civilizational bonds and arrangements…grounded in the active engagement and participation of cultures and people ‘on the ground’, at the juncture of local and global concerns” (2004, 250). As Dallmayr has recently reiterated, the turn to comparative political theory can be understood as an attempt to prevent these looming disasters and an effort to pave the way to global peace.
cross-cultural and intersubjective co-existence on a shared planet. As Dallmayr writes, “the issue is neither to distance the other into the indifference of externality nor to absorb or appropriate otherness in an imperialistic gesture” (1996, 52). On Gadamer’s view, this type of coexistence or co-being comes into view if one looks back on the history of the European continent. As Gadamer argues, “it is one of the special advantages of Europe that – more than elsewhere – her inhabitants have been able or were compelled to learn how to live with others, even if the others were very different” (quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 52). Indeed, the coexistence of a great diversity of nations, cultures, languages and religions on the European continent is, for Gadamer, the distinctive legacy and “promise” of Europe to the world and the emerging world culture. 11 Specifically, he argued that the special “gift” that Europe could bequeath to the rest of the world was its “multicultural and multilingual composition […] its historical practice of cohabitation with otherness in a narrow space” (Dallmayr 2009, 32).

Experienced as a constant struggle and challenge, this cohabitation, Gadamer argued, implies a lesson for humanity at large. Based on these observations, Gadamer concludes that the European model of “unity in diversity” – a model characteristic of hermeneutical dialogue where, coming from different backgrounds, each partner seeks to discern the other’s meaning – must become a global formula, one that should “be

11 As Dallmayr has written elsewhere, in The Legacy of Europe Gadamer “sought to extricate Europe (or the West) from the straightjacket of Eurocentrism, presenting it instead as the symbol of multicultural diversity, ready for new learning experiences in an age of globalization” (Dallmayr 2004, 251). Let us also listen to Gadamer’s (1992, 206) own words: “Thus Europe appears to acquire a new relevance. It has the richest historical experience. For it contains in the smallest space the larges polymorphism and pluralism of linguistic, political, religious, and ethnic traditions, which it has had to cope with for many centuries. Today’s tendency towards unification and the leveling of differences should not lead to the mistaken thought that the deeply rooted pluralism of the cultures, languages and historical fates can actually be suppressed or even should be suppressed. The task could lie in the opposite direction: to develop within a civilization of ever increasing uniformity the authentic life of the regions, the human groups and their forms of life.”
extended to the whole world – to include China, India, and also Muslim cultures” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 2009, 33). Following Gadamer, Dallmayr uncritically embraces this proposal.

Dallmayr is perhaps too generous in his interpretation of Gadamer’s reflections on Europe. To support the claim that Europe, more than any other place in the world, offers a successful example of coexistence, easily opens both to charges of historical amnesia as well as Eurocentrism. One need only remember the devastating wars of religion that decimated the continent in the 16th and 17th centuries, along with the long history of religious persecution in the region, to look with some amount of suspicion on this claim (see, for e.g., Eire 1989). Moving closer to our own time, the rise over the past decade of Islamophobia and nationalistic right-wing parties in Europe casts further doubt on Gadamer’s claim (see, for e.g., McCarthy 2009). As such, one wonders whether Gadamer’s elevation of Europe to the status of model and teacher for the rest of the world – and Dallmayr’s ringing endorsement of it – does not in the end jeopardize the very exit from Orientalism/Eurocentrism that hermeneutics promises to offer.

If hermeneutics is premised on the self’s openness to the perspectives of the other, why does Gadamer not engage with those other voices that, as Dallmayr recognizes, have not experienced Europe (and the West) as the “welter of cultural diversity and multiplicity, but rather as a monolithic structure bent on standardizing the globe under the banner of Western science, technology, and industry” (1993, 525)? In an earlier iteration of the same argument, Dallmayr acknowledges that Gadamer’s vision of the legacy of Europe must be counterbalanced against another European/Western legacy, namely, the legacy of “imperialism, colonialism and politico-
economic spoilage” (Dallmayr 1993, 525). What seems like an opening towards a more balanced assessment of the European tradition is quickly foreclosed when Dallmayr writes that an emphasis on this second, negative legacy threatens to “obliterate Europe’s more benign and humanistic contributions” (ibid). To illustrate this point, Dallmayr directs readers to Samir Amin’s (2009) critique of Eurocentrism, arguing that Amin’s portrayal of modern Western culture as synonymous with capitalist exploitation and domination works to hide from view the “kinder” face of the West. For Dallmayr, Amin’s approach is ultimately detrimental for cross-cultural encounters. “Viewed strictly from the vantage point of Eurocentrism,” Dallmayr writes, “modern Europe no longer is a partner in cross-cultural dialogue, but an enemy to be defeated and destroyed” (Dallmayr 1993, 357).

Dallmayr offers Amin’s book as an exemplar of a narrow perspective that fails to adequately appreciate the positive, non-dominative, and non-imperial elements present in the history of the West. In other words, as a kind of perspective that falls short of Gadamer’s dialogic hermeneutics. And yet, Amin’s book, in so far as it seeks to shed light on an alternative, non-Eurocentric conception of world history – one that seeks to include previously marginalized voices into the picture – can be viewed precisely as the kind of work that should be welcomed by Dallmayr. Far from seeking to portray Europe as an enemy that needs to be defeated and destroyed, Amin sought to show why and how modernity (and capitalism) came to be perceived as phenomena that could only have emerged in the West (from where they could then be “gifted” to the rest of the world). To challenge, as Amin’s book does, the West’s dominant self-understanding is not at all the same as calling for the West’s destruction. That Dallmayr should draw this
conclusion from Amin’s text seems puzzling. After all, does not the central premise of philosophical hermeneutics tell us that, in the encounter between self and other, one must risk one’s prejudices, hold them open to revision, correction, and possible modification? If we see Amin’s book as the “other” that challenges the Western “self” that Dallmayr seeks to defend, then in Dallmayr’s hasty dismissal of Amin’s text – a dismissal that amounts to a rejection of the postcolonial perspective – I believe we are witness to a clear betrayal of the hermeneutic potential that he otherwise so vehemently defends. Because Dallmayr refuses to be challenged by Samir Amin’s perspective, here we come across one of the limit cases that impede the possibility of genuine, mutually transformative dialogue I discussed earlier. That is to say, here we are confronted with a situation in which, as Gadamer said, there is no real desire to reach understanding in the first place, at least no such desire on the part of one of the interlocutors.

Hermeneutics as Praxis

In his recent essay, “Hermeneutics and Inter-cultural Dialogue,” Dallmayr (2009) has sought to strengthen the case for the relevance of hermeneutics to cross-cultural studies by elaborating on the linkage between hermeneutic theory and practice. In this essay Dallmayr returns to Gadamer’s reflections on Europe, but supplements these with a longer discussion of Gadamer’s attempt to link his philosophical hermeneutics to the Aristotelian tradition of phronēsis. As Richard Berstein has pointed out, “[o]ne of the most challenging, intriguing, and important motifs in Gadamer’s work is his effort to link his ontological hermeneutics with the tradition of practical philosophy, especially as it is rooted in Aristotle’s understanding of praxis and phronēsis” (1983, 38). To show that hermeneutics is not just an abstract theory but is intimately linked to praxis, Dallmayr focuses on Gadamer’s discussion of the problem of hermeneutic application (subtilitas
applicandi) that appears in Part 2 of *Truth and Method*. It is here that Gadamer explores the relevance of Aristotle to hermeneutics, and draws a close link between his theory of understanding and practical human conduct.

As Gadamer explains, an early tradition of hermeneutics distinguished three separate elements of understanding: subtilitas intelligendi (understanding), subtilitas explicandi (interpretation), and subtilitas applicandi (application). But Gadamer wants to show, via an analysis of Aristotle’s notion of *phronēsis*, that these three elements are not distinct at all; rather they are internally related and comprise “one unified process,” such that every act of understanding always involves interpretation, and every act of interpretation always involves application: “interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding” (Gadamer 2004, 306). Similarly, “application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning” (ibid, 321). It follows that application, defined as the ability to “[apply] the text to be understood to the interpreter’s own situation,” is an essential moment of hermeneutical understanding (ibid, 307).

Turning to Dallmayr’s interpretation of these passages, we read that “as an ethical *praxis*, application does not just consist in relating a pre-given general principle to a particular case; rather the interpreter has to make sense of his/her situation in light of the broader ‘process of tradition’ (comprising both that situation and the text)” (2009, 29). Dallmayr finds it important to highlight Gadamer’s emphasis on describing hermeneutics as a “lived happening,” a form of human conduct that is neither governed
by an appeal to fixed, technical rules nor by a purely irrational will power; rather, understanding is a form of phronēsis, or ethical know-how (ibid). Just as phronēsis is a form of reasoning that involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular, according to Gadamer the same is also true of all understanding and interpretation:

The interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given to him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more to understand this universal, the text—i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text’s meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all (Gadamer 2004, 321).

We can now begin to appreciate how an analysis of Aristotle’s ethics allows Gadamer to conclude that phronēsis “offers a kind of model of the problems of hermeneutics” (Gadamer 2004, 320-1). Turning to Gadamer’s later essays compiled in Reason in the Age of Science, Dallmayr points to Gadamer’s subsequent reflections on the intimate connection between hermeneutics and practical philosophy. Since its earliest beginning, Gadamer argued, hermeneutics has always claimed “that its reflection on the possibilities, rules and means of interpretation is somehow directly useful or advantageous for lived praxis” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 2009, 30).

Reminding readers of the Aristotelian distinction between praxis, poiesis and techne, Gadamer clarified that praxis and practical philosophy should not be understood as the opposite of theory or as the mere application of a given theory. Rather, the meaning of praxis comes into view when it is contrasted to techne, or the knowledge which directs making (craft). Praxis, and by extension practical philosophy, has to do “not with readily learned crafts and skills [but] with what is fitting for an individual as citizen and what
constitutes his/her civic virtue (arête)” (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 2009: 31).

Whereas techne by itself is not a type of knowledge that directs action, praxis is both guided by a moral disposition to act rightly and gives rise to a special kind of knowledge, namely, phronēsis. As we have already seen, phronēsis involves the ability to move between the general and particular which, as Gadamer sought to demonstrate, was also characteristic of hermeneutics. The following passage illustrates well the connection between praxis and hermeneutics:

The knowledge that guides action is essentially called for by the concrete situations in which we need to choose a fitting response – and no skillful technique can spare us the needed deliberation and decision. As a result, practical philosophy seeking to cultivate this practical ability is neither theoretical science (in the style of mathematics) nor expert know-how (in the sense of mastering technical processes), but a knowledge of a special kind. (As in the case of the hermeneutical circle) this knowledge must arise from praxis and, though moving through various generalizations, must relate itself back to praxis (Gadamer quoted in Dallmayr 2009, 31).

It is at this point, after having clarified how hermeneutics “views human existence itself as an ongoing process of interpretation and self-interpretation” (Dallmayr 1984, 50), that Dallmayr goes on to explain the relevance of hermeneutics for cross-cultural relations.12 In addition to having a practical orientation, hermeneutics is also related to

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12 The concept of “experience” (Erfahrung) provides another key with which to understand Gadamer’s claim that all understanding has a practical orientation in the sense that it is determined by our hermeneutical situation. The hermeneutical situation is defined as identical to the “historically effected consciousness” – the consciousness of being affected by history, or the awareness of being embedded in a particular history and culture that shapes us. Gadamer argues that hermeneutics or “historically effected consciousness has the structure of experience” (2004, 341). After analyzing and exposing some of the limitations of the inductive and dialectical conceptions of experience, Gadamer presents his own understanding of experience, which Dallmayr describes as a “process of existential learning and seasoning” (Dallmayr 1984, 54). It is important to note that Gadamer does not entirely reject the inductive and dialectical “ingredients” of experience, but “incorporates them into a broader and more complex conception”, which also includes an “existential” element or component (Dallmayr 1984, 51). For Gadamer, true experience – i.e., experience that delivers insight – is negative and painful (an insight he borrows from Hegel). It is here that Gadamer also draws the conclusion that “real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness,” that is, it is “experience of one’s own historicity” (2004, 351). For Gadamer, the central feature of all genuine experience is that it leads to openness to ever new experiences. As Dallmayr summarizes, “the central characteristic of experience resides not in its cognitive
“conduct in a given time and place” (Dallmayr 2009, 31). In the context of today’s
globalized world, Dallmayr argues that hermeneutics acquires a cross-cultural or
transnational significance: “members of a given society or culture are called upon to
interpret not only the modalities of their own tradition, but the complex lineaments of
initially quite alien texts and life-forms” (ibid). Such interpretation, Dallmayr suggests,
requires that individuals bring to this encounter their own “fore-meanings” or pre-
understandings, which they then expose to revision and correction through a dialogical
process of interaction (ibid). As Dallmayr suggests, cross-cultural encounters in
essence mimic the dialogical exchange between interpreter and text characteristic of
philosophical hermeneutics. Just as in the case of hermeneutical dialogue, Dallmayr
argues, the point of inter-cultural contact “is not to reach a bland consensus and
uniformity of beliefs but to foster a progressive learning process involving possible
transformation” (Dallmayr 2009, 32). It is in this way, Dallmayr believes, that
philosophical hermeneutics can have relevance for cross-cultural understanding.
Hermeneutics understood as praxis can provide a non-dominative model for how to
engage in cross-cultural learning and dialogue.

Implications

There are three important elements that emerge from Dallmayr’s reading of
Gadamer that have resonance for the enterprise of comparative political theory. First,
Dallmayr embraces an understanding of dialogue as “agonistic,” a view that he clearly
derives from Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy. Modeled on Socratic dialogue, an

contributions but in its open-endedness and its opposition to every form of dogmatic closure” (Dallmayr
1984, 54). Hermeneutical experience, Gadamer suggests, contains the same elements that can be found
agonistic dialogue depends on our willingness to risk our prejudices and a readiness to admit that we may in fact be wrong. Dallmayr comes to this position via an attempt to “rescue” Gadamer from charges that his hermeneutic theory portrays the process of understanding as a smooth blending of views devoid of any struggle or conflict. Dallmayr shows us that Gadamer acknowledged the existence of obstacles that can impede understanding, and guides readers towards the conclusion that the best interpretive approach is a dialogic one, i.e., one that steers a middle course between “understanding and non-understanding” or between “appropriation and renunciation.”

Dallmayr makes recourse to similar polarities when he defines dialogue as the “exploration of the ‘otherness’ of interlocutors on the far side of either assimilation or exclusion” (2009, 23). While Dallmayr is right to suggest that one should not abandon the search for understanding even when confronted with the opacity of otherness, his proposal that one should strive to aim for this middle ground is devoid of any specificity. For example, what would such a middle ground look like? Dallmayr never broaches such questions. Instead, readers are left to conclude that some form of understanding will occur regardless of the obstacles that may be placed in its path. In this sense, Dallmayr’s middle ground begins to look very much like the pole of complete, undistorted understanding that he wishes to avoid. What is lacking in both Gadamer and Dallmayr is an adequate conceptualization of what stands in the way and impedes (cross-cultural) understanding in the contemporary world.

A second, related element that Dallmayr draws from Gadamer’s hermeneutics is the notion of “good will,” i.e. the premise that understanding in dialogue will not be reached unless both parties display a “good will” to try to understand one another. Such
an orientation towards one’s interlocutor implies a readiness and willingness to listen to what one’s interlocutor has to say. As was the case with his uncritical embrace of Gadamerian dialogue, in this case Dallmayr similarly does not interrogate this assumption. For example, he overlooks the possibility that even with “good will” we may still impose hierarchical biases on what we are seeking to understand with “openness.” Finally, Dallmayr’s analysis of the conflicting legacies of Europe – its history of multicultural coexistence on the one hand, and its imperial past on the other – illustrates well some of the political implications of the embrace of philosophical hermeneutics. In insisting on the importance of highlighting the “good,” anti-imperial legacy of Europe, Dallmayr simultaneously works to deemphasize the negative elements in European history. It is crucial to note that Dallmayr invokes Gadamer’s writings in The Legacy of Europe on three separate occasions, in the course of elaborating on the work of the German thinker. As I discussed earlier, in his 1993 essay titled “Self and Other: Gadamer and the Hermeneutics of Difference,” Dallmayr references Europe’s imperialist legacy as a way of tempering Gadamer’s one-sided impressions about Europe’s multiculturalism, but quickly takes the discussion in a different direction. A revised version of the same argument appears in Beyond Orientalism (1996), and more recently in Dallmayr’s 2009 article. What stands out in these two later iterations of the argument is that here the references to Europe’s imperialist legacy are entirely left out. Although this may not have been Dallmayr’s explicit goal, the fact that he chose to withhold the imperialist dimension of Western history could easily be interpreted as an attempt to cleanse the West of its less flattering historical legacy. This disavowal forces
us to raise anew the question of the possibility of critique within the framework of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

**Roxanne Euben’s Reading of Gadamer**

In comparison to Dallmayr, Euben takes a slightly more critical approach to philosophical hermeneutics. In her *Enemy in the Mirror*, Euben uses her analysis of the 20th century Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb not only as an occasion to explore his work but also as an opportunity to elaborate on and defend an approach to reading non-Western texts that allows us to understand them without imposing our hegemonic categories in interpreting their meaning. Like Dallmayr, Euben embraces the open-endedness of the dialogic model of understanding associated with the work of Gadamer. Gadamerian hermeneutics allows Euben to engage non-Western thinkers and ideas “on their own terms, or at least on as close to their own terms as is possible for an interpreter whose position is exterior to the worldview of the subject” (Euben 1999, 12-13). Euben finds the hermeneutic approach praiseworthy not only because it allows for the possibility of “intelligibly rendering the world of the ‘Other’,” but also because it makes interpretation and dialogue central to this endeavor. Gadamer’s view of understanding as a “reciprocal, transformative, and…above all, ongoing process,” Euben argues, not only allows us to enter into the conceptual worlds of thinkers with whom we do not share the same culture; importantly, it allows us to do so in a manner that allows our own views to be challenged (Euben 1999, 13).

Euben is careful to point out that the notion of dialogue or conversation between cultures (and theoretical traditions) should not blind us to the fact that, in our contemporary world, such dialogues often occur against the backdrop of immense inequalities. For Euben, however, the existence of power asymmetries between the
West and the non-Western world does not mean that we are doomed to Orientalize others. In the context of global inequalities, Euben suggests that the dialogic approach recommends itself as the most appropriate way of overcoming Orientalism not because dialogue “is invulnerable to distortions of power but because it is less susceptible to them” than other explanatory models (Euben 1999, 13).

Euben is certainly more forthright than Dallmayr in her admission that dialogue is not free from power and, unlike him, remains sensitive to the possible limits of a purely dialogic model of understanding. Invoking Jürgen Habermas’s critique of Gadamer, Euben similarly argues that Gadamer’s hermeneutics neglects issues of power and domination. While she agrees with Gadamer and Habermas that language is a medium of all social interactions, following Habermas Euben argues that language can distort and conceal, just as much as it can express and reveal “the social, political, and economic conditions of life” (Euben 1999, 38). Not only that, following Habermas, Euben argues that language also constitutes and is constituted by material conditions.

Euben deploys Habermas’s critique as a corrective to Gadamer’s project. In doing so she seeks to forestall one of the most frequently leveled charges at Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, namely, that the interpretive attempt to understand the “other” on the “other’s” own terms leaves no room for the possibility of critical engagement. Euben finds it important to point out that Habermas’ critique shows “how a dialogic model of interpretation can attend to actors’ self-understandings without requiring that the interpreter abandon a perspective that makes both evaluation and critique possible” (Euben 1999, 38). Following Habermas, Euben wants to show that interpretive approaches need not do away with all standards of objectivity; rather, what
she wants to challenge is the positivist notion of objectivity that relies on the correspondence theory of truth (Euben 1999, 38, 39). The Habermasian critique, Euben suggests, allows us to gain sufficient critical distance from the social practices we study, enabling a kind of “outsider’s” perspective “that is in history but detached from it” (Euben 1999, 40).

Euben’s preference for a Gadamerian inspired dialogic model of interpretation as applied to the study of Islamic fundamentalism (and other non-Western traditions more broadly) can therefore be attributed to the fact that this approach (supplemented by the Habermasian critique) rejects positivist epistemologies and their implicit reliance on the existence of a neutral, unbiased observer capable of arriving at an objective understanding of a single and final truth. Against this method, hermeneutics views understanding as a “dialogue between two horizons of meaning, neither of which can claim a monopoly on truth” (Euben 1999, 36) For Euben, the advantage of hermeneutics is that it keeps open the possibility of a plurality of meanings and interpretations. As she suggests, hermeneutic philosophy’s insistence on the fact that individuals are embedded in particular traditions and carry “prejudices” that cannot be set aside allows the interpreter to attend “to the terms and categories used by the participants themselves” (Euben 1999, 36, 157).

Despite her reliance on Habermas’s critique, Euben does not abandon Gadamer. She embraces his view of understanding as a process that “emerges from a dialogue in which participants attempt to cross divides of meaning by acknowledging and appropriating their own prejudices within a language that evolves to accommodate and ultimately transform disparate understandings into mutually intelligible meanings”
On Euben’s account, the value of Gadamerian hermeneutics lies in the fact that it refuses to view cultures (and cultural practices) as hermetically sealed containers of meaning impervious to understanding. In addition to denying incommensurability, for Euben the virtue of Gadamer’s dialogic approach is that it holds open the possibility of uncovering heretofore unimagined or neglected connections between different cultures and theoretical traditions (Euben 1999, 11).

**Implications: Applying Hermeneutics.** Euben puts Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach into practice by placing Sayyid Qutb’s indictment of post-Enlightenment rationalism into conversation with the political thought of a number of Western thinkers (including MacIntyre, Arendt, and Taylor) who were similarly concerned with the crises in authority, morality, and community experienced in the wake of modernity and the rise of secularism. The upshot of Euben’s comparison between Western and Islamic thought is that it reveals certain similarities between them, which in turn allow us to see past the “alienness” of Islamic fundamentalist thought. Staging such a conversation, Euben argues, allows us to view Qutb as one interlocutor in a larger conversation about modernity and rationalism, a conversation in which we (the West) also participate (Euben 1999, 155). As Hassan Bashir argues, comparative work such as Euben’s has opened the possibility of seeing the ideas of a radical Islamic fundamentalist thinker like Qutb as conceptually parallel to Hanna Arendt’s critique of Western rationalism (Bashir 2013, 15).

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13 As Euben writes, “political theory can be enriched by hearing Qutb’s voice not only because of the ways it speaks to our concerns but also because of the ways it mirrors, challenges, enlarges, and transforms them” (Euben 1999, 12).
And yet Euben’s application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics to the study of Qutb’s thought does not ultimately achieve the effect that her theoretical discussion had suggested it would achieve. Euben refrains from seriously challenging and critiquing Qutb’s work (Euben 1999, 15), though she does admit that we cannot accept his views entirely. Since Euben is primarily preoccupied with articulating an understanding of Qutb’s political thought from the “inside,” she is reluctant to specify what criteria we may adopt in evaluating his thought. If the aim of the dialogical approach is to provoke and challenge our prejudices through an encounter with the unfamiliar, Euben leaves readers of Enemy in the Mirror wondering how, if at all, our understanding of modernity may have been challenged by Qutb’s work. Because Qutb’s critique of modernity parallels critiques expressed by thinkers such as Arendt, Taylor, and MacIntyre, it does not become clear what readers could have learned from this staged conversation between Western and Islamic critics of modernity that they could not have picked up simply from reading only Arendt or Taylor for example.

Part of Euben’s reluctance to challenge Qutb’s work stems from her understanding of the aims of the dialogic approach. For Euben, the goal of this approach is not to help us arrive at a “final,” “objective” interpretation of a particular text (Euben 1999, 44). Given that understanding is conceived as a reciprocal, transformative, and ongoing process, the dialogic approach suggests that no one has definitive answers. It also points “to the finitude of our capacity to understand” (Euben 1999, 13). Such an understanding of dialogue, however, presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, this approach is meant to temper what J.L. Mehta has called our “will to interpret,” that is, it prevents us from interpreting non-Western texts on the basis of our
own categories. On the other hand, as Euben argues, this approach also suggests that our capacity to understand is ultimately limited because of our inescapable situatedness within a hermeneutic circle (Euben 1999, 42). As I have tried to show, when Euben puts this approach into practice, she is able to accomplish the outward movement into the world of the “other.” However, she is unable to clarify how the journey into the foreign and the strange leads to an altered self-understanding – in this case, how it alters our understanding of modernity, and more broadly, how it might alter our understanding of political theory.

Both Euben and Dallmayr embrace Gadamer’s theoretical insight that understanding involves neither complete self-erasure nor complete imposition of one’s own categories. From their respective engagement with Gadamer’s work, a particular meaning of dialogue begins to emerge. When comparative political theorists speak about dialogue they have in mind the act of bringing into conversation at least two distinct voices or perspectives. The hope and expectation is that the dialectical interaction between these perspectives will bring about new insights about political life. Following Gadamer, dialogue is conceived as a form of conversation in which both sides travel (cross over to the other perspective and cross back to one’s own), learn, and change. In this model of dialogue, the other perspective is conceived as a form of provocation or disruption that engenders the movement of understanding. The brush of perspectives produces a tension between familiarity and strangeness. The goal is to work out this tension by moving from inside to outside (self-dislocation) and back again (self-relocation). The assumption that is held constant is that in dialogical interaction both sides can ultimately learn from one another and be transformed.
However, this assumption becomes complicated once political and epistemic issues are brought into consideration (Goto-Jones 2013). Specifically, this model of dialogue relies on a willingness to acknowledge the other as a conversation partner and on the possibility of commensurability between perspectives. Despite acknowledging some of the difficulties that might impede understanding, following Gadamer there is a tendency by comparative political theorists to portray the movement of dialogue (and understanding) as a bit too easy and smooth. Indeed, dialogue here emerges as a process that inherently makes better communication possible.

As I argued in the previous chapter, a number of comparative political theorists invoke the tropes of provocation, self-disruption, and self-dislocation to highlight the benefits that ensue for both parties from cross-cultural dialogue. But absent a more concrete theorization of how a dialogue may unsettle and disrupt our self-understandings, the repeated invocation of this trope remains just a phrase. In so far as dialogue and the productive self-disruption it engenders has relevance beyond the realm of textual interpretations, and in so far as it is described as holding the key to real political violence in the world, it becomes imperative to give some specificity to what such self-disruption actually entails. To this end, in the next section I offer an example of an encounter that produced the kind of provocation and self-disruption that comparative political theorists invoke but do not theorize. This example problematizes the easy separation of dialogue from power.

**The Power in Dialogue**

In the previous sections I drew attention to the value of Gadamer’s model of understanding as elaborated in the work of Dallmayr and Euben. For both, the greatest strength of philosophical hermeneutics is its open-ended nature and the fact that it is
“hospitable to multiple and expanding horizons” (Dallmayr 2002, 27). Both Euben and Dallmayr find especially appealing Gadamer’s emphasis on the fact that, in dialogue, no one has definitive answers. Instead, the attention shifts to questioning and remaining open to being questioned (be it by the text or by the another person). In the context of CPT this means that no one civilization can claim a monopoly on truth.

In this section I offer an example of a concrete hermeneutical encounter as a way of theorizing the kind of self-disruption comparative political theorists speak of. I draw my example from Joshua Casteel’s book, Letters from Abu Ghraib, a collection of email messages that Casteel sent to his family and friends while he served as a U.S. Army interrogator and Arabic translator at Abu Ghraib from June 2004 to January 2005. The dialogue described below highlights the positive impacts of the kind of self-disruption extolled by comparative political theorists, but also challenges the Gadamerian framework of dialogue on which they rely.

**The interrogator and the detainee.** Joshua Casteel was raised in an Evangelical Christian household where, as he recounts, he was taught to equate love of country with love of God. Coming from a military family, he describes himself as “a child of home-schooling and Bible quizzing” (2008a, 72). As he writes, “I was not supposed to be the kid who gets upset by violence, ambition and proto-imperialism…I was supposed to ascend the ranks of the military, then the ranks of Washington” (ibid). His plans were derailed. Casteel enlisted in the army soon after September 11th, 2001 and found himself stationed at Abu Ghraib as part of the “clean up” unit sent to overhaul the prison in the wake of the 2004 prisoner abuse scandal. A deeply religious man, a reader of Deitrich Bonhoeffer and Jacques Derrida, the collection of emails Casteel sent to his
friends and family chronicle his struggle to reconcile his Christianity with the fact of war. While the letters themselves do not contain much information about daily life at Abu Ghraib, they nevertheless grant readers access to Casteel’s inner life. On the one hand, we see a 24-year-old man torn between the deception integral to his line of work as interrogator and his Christian obligation to tell the truth. We also catch glimpses of an idealistic (even self-righteous) individual eager to depart for Abu Ghraib, confident that nothing like the prisoner abuse would occur under his watch. At the same time we also become privy to his profound doubts, to the side of him that wonders “what a blond, blue-eyed Iowan boy is doing in Iraq in the first place…with Caesar’s body armor and an M-16” (Catseel 2008, 4). Readers hear Casteel equate his job as interrogator to that of a Father Confessor: “As a confessor you cannot coerce a person to reveal that which they wish to hide. A confessor’s aim is to help the one confessing to be sincere. […] I do not coerce” (ibid, 14, 36). A few emails later, in an email sent to his father, this self-righteous tone gives way to a profound doubt: “Being a man’s inquisitor in the name of secular justice feels so often like fraud (ibid, 27). […] I am constantly falsely accusing people of things, using a man’s emotions of vengeance for self-gain. I am an intimate partner in the killing of men without trial” (ibid, 90). The Father Confessor has become an inquisitor; the defender of truth has become a deceiver. The distinctions begin to blur.

One encounter in particular during his time at Abu Ghraib proved transformative for Casteel. After five months of interrogating mostly innocent Iraqis (schoolboys, taxi-drivers, fathers, and Imams), it was during one such interrogation that Casteel finally came face to face with a self-declared jihadist, a 22-year-old Saudi Arabian man who
had been picked up by coalition forces just two weeks after he had entered Iraq. “So, I just experienced why it is I am here in Iraq,” Casteel writes. “I just ‘met’ my reason – a young foreign jihadist who said he might kill me if he had the chance (that is, as long as I am a US soldier in Muslim lands)” (ibid, 101). From the very start of the interrogation, Casteel recounts that he was frustrated by the Saudi Arabian man, namely, by the fact that he was submitting to Casteel’s authority not out of a feeling of fear but quite willingly, even with a show of confidence.\(^{14}\) Unable to “trip up” the jihadist with his rapid stream of verbally aggressive questioning, Casteel decides to switch tactics and asks the man why he had come to Iraq to kill. The reply comes in the form of an unexpected question, “Why did you [Casteel] come here to kill?” (Casteel 2007, np). From this point onwards the entire dynamic of the interrogation changes. The questioner becomes the questioned.

Casteel responds that he had come to defend the Iraqi people, and out of a duty to his country. The Saudi man challenges Casteel by saying, “If the military didn’t want people to be killed they would have sent someone else, not soldiers. Soldiers are sent when people need to be killed” (Casteel 2007, np). Casteel is struck by the irony of the situation. Two men, an interrogator and a prisoner, both claiming to have come to Iraq to do what each understood to be their respective duty;\(^ {15}\) both devoted to their religions, and both willing to kill to defend their people. Attempting to convert Casteel to Islam, the jihadist challenges Casteel’s beliefs as a Christian: “You said you are a Christian, but

\(^{14}\) Casteel had ordered the man to sit on his hands and look straight ahead when questioned.

\(^{15}\) The Saudi man had invoked jihad as his reason for entering Iraq. According to Casteel, the Saudi man employed by the notion of jihad in the sense of an individual’s duty to defend Muslim lands that had been invaded by a foreign (non-Muslim) army.
you don’t follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Your Lord, our prophet Isa, tells you to turn the other cheek, to love those who hate you. Why do you not do this?” (ibid, 102) It is at this moment, Casteel recounts, that he realized the Saudi man was right. As he writes, “I lacked the power to challenge him in any way that I did not challenge myself, because such ideas of ‘love’ and ‘forgiveness’ and ‘compassion’ are not fully manifest and incarnate in me, tangibly and practically to be seen and felt” (ibid). Giving him what essentially amounted to a lesson about The Sermon on the Mount, the jihadist’s challenge forced Casteel into the realization that he was not living by the principles he preached. Realizing that he had lost all objectivity as an interrogator, Casteel stops the interrogation: “I left and I prayed I would be given the chance to see him one day in the future when I could say, ‘I left that world behind me, so can you” (ibid, 102). As he recounts, he had stopped the interrogation because he had begun to see the Saudi man as his counterpart, as someone who was trying to convert him in the same way that Casteel was trying to convert the jihadist.

Casteel does not tell readers what became of the Saudi man. But we do learn that this encounter crystallized Casteel’s decision to apply for conscientious objector status. His application was approved, and he was honorably discharged from the army in 2005. He converted to Catholicism soon after. Following his return from Iraq, Casteel became an outspoken critic of the war and joined the Iraq Veterans Against the War. In 2011 he was diagnosed with a rare form of lung cancer, an illness which he believed was a result of being exposed to the toxic fumes from the burn pits in Iraq. Casteel passed away in August 2012 at the age of 32.
What can we learn from this encounter between the Christian interrogator and the Saudi jihadist? Does it illustrate the Gadamerian fusion of horizons, or does it exemplify a missed encounter? I use this example in order to begin problematizing the notion of dialogue advanced by CPT scholars. Dialogue can take on many forms, depending on the interlocutors, the subject matter discussed, and the location where the dialogue takes place. Depending on who is authorized to speak, dialogues may promote exclusion just as much as they can encourage the inclusion of certain voices. The encounter just described offers an example of the kind of transformative self-disruption that may occur in the course of a meeting with the new and unfamiliar. As CPT scholars would tell us, such disruptions can lead to profound transformations of self, ultimately resulting in the loss of the will to dominate. In different ways, all of these characteristics are certainly recognizable in the context of the encounter between the interrogator and the detainee. In the case of Casteel, the encounter leads him to the realization that his work as a military interrogator is incompatible with his deeper aspiration to follow and live by the teachings of the Gospel. Ultimately, this leads him to renounce his military life, adopt a new religion, and become a critic of the war.

How does Casteel’s response to the encounter measure up against the kind of transformation that Euben, Dallmayr, Godrej, and other CPT scholars argue is ultimately beneficial for the self? Is this encounter a dialogue of the sort that, following Gadamer, comparative political theorists embrace? To answer these questions we must recall the three main components of dialogue that Gadamer posits. The first requirement for dialogue is that “the partners do not talk at cross purposes” (Gadamer 2004, 360). As Gadamer elaborates, “to conduct a [dialogue] means to allow oneself to be conducted
by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented” (ibid, 360-361). A “genuine” dialogue, therefore, has as its main objective the sincere attempt by each participant to unravel the truth with regards to the subject matter (Swartz and Cilliers 2003, 3). Although Gadamer argues that in order to achieve understanding in dialogue there must be an explicit attempt to reach agreement about the subject matter (2004, 292), nevertheless, and as Lauren Barthold points out, this does not mean that agreement will be reached easily or at the expense of the otherness of the other (2010, 103). In dialogue we open ourselves to a new experience. Because for Gadamer all experience has the character of productive negativity, the openness of dialogue implies that we also expose ourselves to suffering (2004, 347). We risk our prejudices, we risk critique, and we risk being misunderstood.

A second fundamental precondition for dialogue is the “good will” of the participants to try to understand one another (Gadamer 1989, 33). When invoking the notion of good will Gadamer refers to Plato’s “eumeneis elenchoi” – the hermeneutical attitude of openness, of acknowledging that we may have something to learn from the other. As Gadamer explains, in a genuine dialogue “one does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is right, but one seeks instead as far as possible to strengthen the other’s viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating” (1989, 55). Different from an argument, the aim of dialogue is not to “argue the other person down,” to score points, or to win them over to one’s side; rather, the goal is to consider the weight of the other person’s opinion (Gadamer 2004, 361). This implies a willingness to listen to what the other

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16 But see the Gadamer-Derrida debate.
person has to say as well as to offer reasons and justifications for one’s view (Barthold 2010, 106). Finally, a third pre-condition for dialogue requires an admission of ignorance on the part of both interlocutors akin to Socrates’ declaration that “one knows that one doesn’t know.” As I explained in the previous chapter, it suggests forsaking the position that one already knows the answer in advance.

The encounter between Casteel and the detainee both fulfills but also problematizes the terms of the Gadamerian notion of dialogue. Because dialogue has the structure of play, Gadamer argues that we cannot be forced into a dialogue but already find ourselves in it. Play presupposes a willingness to play on the part of the participants. But, as Gadamer notes, “even within his readiness to play [the player] makes a choice. He chooses this game rather than that” (2004, 107). Gadamer defines play as a process that does “not have its being in the player’s consciousness or attitude.” On the contrary, “play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit”. In turn, “the player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him” (ibid, 109). In order to truly play, we must allow ourselves to be swept away into play, to be drawn away from ourselves – i.e. away from our perspective but not from our historical situatedness. As Gadamer writes, the attraction of a game consists in the fact that it masters the players. Play plays us, so to speak (ibid, 106)

The encounter discussed above takes place under conditions of war. One of the interlocutors (the detainee) has no other choice but to submit to the interrogation. In this sense, the encounter and ensuing dialogue are forced, staged, and scripted. There is clear evidence of coercion in so far as the detainee is forced to sit on his hand and to look straight ahead. All of these elements violate the Gadamerian requirements for
dialogue. However, we also know that the reason for Casteel’s initial frustration with the
detainee is that the latter, in confidently submitting to Casteel’s orders, was quite willing
to play the interrogation game. It is this very openness that seems to have altered the
course of the conversation, taking it in a direction that could hardly have been
anticipated by Casteel. Such openness to experience and the unexpected outcome fit
well into Gadamer’s schema. As it turns out, in having to explain and justify his decision
to come to Iraq, Casteel is forced into realizing the fundamental contradiction between
his service as a soldier and his desire to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ,
to love his enemies, to turn the other cheek. In the jihadist’s accusation Casteel catches
sight of that other dimension of his self (here also understood in the broader sense of
his own culture and tradition) – the non-militaristic aspect of his self, the self that had to
be suppressed for the sake of assuming an imperial identity.

The jihadist’s challenge to Casteel can be related to Mahatma Gandhi’s
challenge to the British and the “West” more generally. Gandhi borrowed the idea of
non-violence from Leo Tolstoy and the Sermon on the Mount. By embodying and living
by the principle of non-violence articulated in the Gospel, Gandhi tried to be a living
symbol of the “other” West – the non-violent, non-imperial West. As Ashis Nandy writes,
“Gandhi was a living antithesis set up against the thesis of the English, but that
antithesis was latent in the English, too” (Nandy 2009, 49). Unlike Gandhi, the jihadist
did not himself embody those principles. Nevertheless, his challenge to Casteel can be
read in a parallel way.

In its effect on Casteel, this exchange perhaps represents the best of what
comparative political theorists suggest can happen as a result of a hermeneutic
encounter – a transformative self-critique that does not leave us as we were before. At the same time, Casteel’s encounter with the detainee also points to a weakness in the CPT literature. CPT scholars have not made clear how the disruptions they argue occur in the process of crossing borders into “other” perspectives have been used to redefine or even critique existing political thought. As I showed in the previous chapter, although comparative political theorists conceptualize the process of dialogue as a back and forth movement between “self” and “other,” they have been reluctant to clarify the impact of this dialogue for the canon of political thought. This suggests two things: either such an impact has not occurred, which means that dialogues need not always be self-transformative; or that this impact has been ignored. If the latter is the case, then this brings us close to Goto-Jones’s suggestion that comparative political theory is simply a code name for “colonial tolerance” (Goto-Jones 2013, 160).

The encounter between Casteel and the detainee is instructive in another way as well. It shows that what the metaphor of play and the notion of dialogue miss in this context is the fact that in the give-and-take of the interrogation, any question, any answer may determine the detainee’s fate. This aspect of power – having power over someone’s life – is hidden from view in Gadamer’s conceptualization of dialogue. In many respects, power is also held at a distance in Casteel’s Letters from Abu Ghraib. As such, it becomes conspicuous by its absence. But it also becomes apparent in Casteel’s attempt to redescribe his job as interrogator as that of a father confessor:

A confessor provides the opportunity for a safe disclosure, offers a way out of secrecy. Interrogation is like a chess match, a battle of wits. But it is also a relationship of understanding, where I try to use a person’s internal belief scheme to encourage them to narrate dishonorable actions with their own words. This tactic takes far more time and patience, but is far more effective in the long run and far more unsettling to the extremist Muslim who has
been trained to prepare for torture. The aggressive approach reinforces their preconceptions that America is Satan and that the coalition is a Zionist conspiracy bent on their destruction. Empathy, if it is authentic itself, is far more unsettling, and forces a person to question the legitimacy of their training and indoctrination (2008, 32).

Casteel's *Letters from Abu Ghraib* opens up a tension. On the one hand, it shows that dialogue need not be incompatible with military confrontation. In so far as interrogation is a form of dialogue, it goes hand-in-hand with war. On the other hand, as I have already shown, the book also offers an example of the transformative aspect of dialogue emphasized by comparative political theorists. Importantly, in trying to separate the coercive aspect of interrogation from the empathetic dimension that he associates with the role of father confessor Casteel, perhaps unwittingly, ends up showing how the two roles actually blur. In the context of the war, rather than being its opposite, the father confessor is simply the "kinder" face of empire.

In the introduction to this chapter I referenced Dallmayr's separation between dialogue and power, which is evident in his declaration that dialogue offers the only alternative to military confrontation. In many respects, both this and the preceding chapters have sought to bring out the ways in which comparative political theory has constructed its identity by consciously drawing a sharp dividing line between dialogue and power. But in order to accomplish this move, CPT has had to portray its "other" (the Western canon) as ethnocentric and exclusive so that it (CPT) could define itself as global and inclusive. In doing so, however, it has become blind to the fact that dialogue need not be incompatible with mastery and the will to power. I take up the implications of this is the next chapter.
CHAPTER 6
THE HUMAN TERRAIN SYSTEM

Introduction

Whereas the previous four chapters have told the story of comparative political theory, in this chapter the focus of analysis shifts to the Human Terrain System (HTS), a military program created to support the United States’ counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. As I noted in the Introduction, HTS shares certain similarities with CPT. Specifically, both projects share an interest in foreign cultures and a belief that increased cross-cultural understanding can minimize, if not altogether eliminate conflict and bring peace. But where CPT portrays itself as a project that ultimately militates against empire, HTS employs the same language of respect for cultural difference to support the work of empire. In the previous chapter, I expressed the concern that CPT scholars, due to their particular understanding of dialogue, are not sufficiently attentive to the risks inherent in cross-cultural encounters. In this chapter, I suggest that the case of HTS can not only reveal some of the ways in which cultural knowledge can be misused, but also offers a very concrete example of how sympathetic understanding of non-Western traditions and ways of life need not be incompatible with a hegemonic form of politics. In this chapter, therefore, I use the case of HTS to raise a doubt that sympathy and a heightened appreciation for cultural difference will necessarily lead to, what David Scott has called, a “more egalitarian era of knowledge-relations between the West and its Others” (2003, 93).

To raise this doubt, I begin by situating CPT in relation to another development within the field of political theory, namely, the recent explosion of scholarly work on the subject of empire. This, in turn, can partly be seen as a response to the outpouring of
debates in the mainstream press, especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, over the idea of an American empire. It is only when this broader, global framework of relations, is brought to the fore that the emergence of the HTS program can be better understood. Furthermore, locating CPT within this global context adds another layer to our understanding of its emergence during this particular historical period.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section I discuss the broader debates about empire among various academics, policymakers, and pundits that came on the heels of US unilateralism after 2001. In a second move, I relate this to the emergence of empire as a topic of study in political theory. These debates have produced insightful analyses regarding the relationship between liberalism and empire, and provide a useful lens through which we can understand the turn to culture in the US military and, more importantly, the emergence of HTS. In particular, I draw on the recent scholarship of Karuna Mantena and Patrick Porter who have argued that, historically and today, the shift of attention to the culture of the “other” has been a response to imperial crisis. A contemporary manifestation of this is the U.S. military’s turn to culture and the creation of HTS to support the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. I explore this in the second section of this chapter. Finally, using the work of David Scott, I elaborate one important parallel between the aims of CPT and HTS, especially in regards to the ever-present influence of power on dialogue and understanding.

**The Emergence of Debates About Empire**

Over the past decade a number of scholars, commentators and policymakers on both the left and right of the political spectrum have argued forcefully for the return of empire as a stabilizing force in global politics. Such arguments have gained
prominence, in part, as a consequence of the United States’ emergence as the sole
global superpower at the end of the Cold War and its unabashed militarism and
unilateralism in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Those attempting to come to grips
with the particular character of American power in the 21st century – including the U.S.
occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq – have searched the history of European
colonialism for useful comparisons, with the British empire emerging as the most
commonly cited precedent for the type of global power wielded by the United States.
For example, conservative commentator Max Boot wrote as early as 2001 that
“Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign
administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets”
Boot 2001, np). A similar endorsement of and turn to the experience of the British
empire as a model for U.S. foreign policy was made by Atlantic Monthly analyst Robert
D. Kaplan who ends one of his essays by invoking Winston Churchill’s hope that the
United States would prove itself to be “a worthy successor to the British Empire, one
that would carry on Britain’s liberalizing mission” (Kaplan 2003, np).

At the same time that some journalists and academics looked to the British
Empire for analogies and guidance, others stressed the novelty and distinctiveness of
America’s imperial moment arguing that the global actions of the United States –
especially since 2001 – constitute a “new imperialism.” In a celebrated essay that
helped to promote and legitimate the war in Iraq, Michael Ignatieff defended the project
and necessity for American empire thusly:

America’s empire is not like empires of times past, built on colonies,
conquest and the white man’s burden. […] The 21st century imperium is a
new invention in the annals of political science, an empire lite, a global
hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and
democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known (Ignatieff 2003, np).

Ignatieff’s call for a benevolent, liberal imperialism echoes the public writings of senior British diplomat Robert Cooper. In an article that provoked much outrage among the left, Cooper (2002, np) defended the practice of double standards in foreign policy and argued that what the world needs now is a “new kind of imperialism, one acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values”; an imperialism which “aims to bring order and organization” to a world threatened by the chaos of “pre-modern” states – a term Cooper uses to designate those (non-Western) states that have failed to reach the highest stage of the civilizational ladder and hence are insufficiently modern. For Cooper, “the most logical way to deal with [the] chaos [engendered by the less civilized] is colonization” (ibid). Although he admits that old-style colonialism is no longer compatible with the values of the contemporary civilized world, Cooper nevertheless asserts that “the need for colonization is as great as it ever was in the nineteenth century” (ibid). As indicated above, Cooper (2002) finds a resolution to this moral dilemma by advocating a type of benevolent imperialism, one that would not trouble the conscience of the West.

Following the late Chalmers Johnson, we might locate contemporary support for empire into either of two broad camps. On the one hand, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the lead up to the war in Iraq we heard arguments calling for an unconstrained, unilateral American empire. At the same time, there were many voices

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1 Cooper (2002, np) writes, “Among ourselves [the Western states], we operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative security. But when dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of states outside the postmodern continent of Europe, we need to revert to the tougher methods of an earlier era – force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the nineteenth century world of every state for itself. Among ourselves, we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle.”
endorsing a “softer” version of imperialism, an empire lite “devoted to ‘humanitarian’ objectives” (Johnson 2004, 67). While the tone of these arguments ranges from triumphalist to tragic, their substance remains the same for both groups. What deserves attention, however, is not so much the fact that US global actions have increasingly been described as imperial. In itself, this is not such a radical insight. Even the most cursory look at the history of American expansionism reveals that the United States is no stranger to imperialism. Rather, what deserves comment is the “nakedness” (Foster 2007, 11) with which American imperialism has been promoted and endorsed in recent years. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of this “new imperialism” is the ease with which a significant number of academics and commentators turned from a discourse of empire denial to what the late Howard Zinn has called a “boastful, unashamed embrace of the idea [of empire]” (Zinn 2008, np).

The explicit revival of imperialism and colonialism has been accompanied by revisionist, and ultimately redemptive, historiographies of European empires. If colonialism had been largely condemned as a bad thing, recent reassessments of the costs and benefits of empire have sought to convince a global audience that, on the whole, colonialism was not so bad after all. A prominent example of this trend to “pretify” imperialist are the writings of British historian Niall Ferguson who, along with Michael Ignatieff, has been one of the most outspoken advocates of empire. On

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2 See Daedalus (2005) special issue on empire.

3 Even more so when one considers the long history of empire denial that characterizes self-descriptions of US power. See Nikhil Singh (2006).

4 For a critique of this revisionism, see Richard Drayton (2011).

5 I borrow this term from Chalmers Johnson (2007, 72).
Ferguson’s (2003, np) account “the world as we know it today is in large measure the product of Britain’s age of Empire.” And this, he avows, is undeniably a good thing. Ferguson celebrates the British Empire for its role in spreading Western institutions and modes of governance around the world, including free trade, the rule of law, the free movement of people and capital and, most important of all, the idea of liberty. Although he admits that the history of the British empire was not devoid of violent episodes – he cites its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, its practices of racial discrimination, and its brutal suppression of indigenous uprisings – Ferguson quickly glosses over the illiberal moments of an otherwise liberal British empire in order to emphasize its constitutive role in promoting global welfare.

Taking a counterfactual approach to historical inquiry, Ferguson asks readers to imagine whether the world as we know it today would have come into being without the British Empire. His answer is a resounding no. Let us listen to his words:

As I traveled around [the British] empire’s remains in the first half of 2002, I was constantly struck by its ubiquitous creativity. To imagine the world without the empire would be to expunge from the map the elegant boulevards of Williamsburg and old Philadelphia; to sweep into the sea the squat battlements of Port Royal, Jamaica; to return to the bush the glorious skyline of Sydney; to level the steamy seaside slum that is Freetown, Sierra Leone; to fill in the Big Hole at Kimberley; to demolish the mission at Kuruman; to send the town of Livingstone hurtling over the Victoria Falls. [...] Without the British empire, there would be no Calcutta; no Bombay; no Madras. Indians may rename them as many times as they like, but these vast metropoles remain cities founded and built by the British. [...] There is reason to doubt that the world would have been the same or even similar in the absence of the empire (Ferguson 2003, np).

Ferguson’s narrative swiftly dispenses with, and implicitly justifies, the violence of the colonial encounter by placing emphasis on the creative destruction of empire. It is only through the use of force and the coercive power of empire, Ferguson (2004) contends, that the British empire’s project of “Anglobalization” became possible in the first place.
Without the British empire to create the conditions of global economic integration, globalization would not have occurred on its own. Readers are thus left to understand that despite some unfortunate episodes, in the end, the benefits of empire – which in Ferguson’s case include an interconnected world of free markets – far outweigh the costs. Ferguson offered his favorable portrayal of Britain’s imperial legacy partly as a way to convince an American audience in 2003 to stop living in denial and embrace the reality that the US was an empire. What the experience of the British empire proved, Ferguson (2004, 362) concluded, “is that empire is a form of international government that can work – and not just for the benefit of the ruling power.”

Political theory and the turn to empire. The outpouring of debates in the mainstream press over the idea of an American empire, and the resurgence of interest in imperial political forms more generally, find a parallel in the recent explosion of scholarly work on empire in the field of political theory. Compared to other academic disciplines, political theory’s turn to imperialism and colonialism – and their historical

6 To be sure, Ferguson’s is not an isolated argument. A similar historiography appears in Anthony Pagden’s Peoples and Empires, a short book that surveys the history of the great European empires form antiquity to their demise in the mid 20th century. As Pagden explains, throughout history “Empires have severely limited the freedoms of some peoples, but they have also given others opportunities they could not otherwise have imagined” (Pagden 2003, xxiv). Like Ferguson, Pagden also highlights the simultaneously destructive and creative dimensions of empire. He admits that the European empires were responsible for “a great deal of human suffering” including the annihilation of entire civilizations. Once this admission is made, however, Pagden quickly moves to emphasize these empires’ centrality in bringing into being entirely new societies, as well as their role in facilitating the spread of human knowledge, and opening new trade routes and avenues for communication (Pagden 2003, ibid). As with Ferguson, Pagden’s narrative all too easily recasts the losses and devastation inflicted by these empires into their opposite, namely, as opportunity. Even as they acknowledge the brutality and destructive impulses of empire, in the end both authors’ narratives do away with the violence of conquest – a basic and constitutive fact of colonialism. As Antonio Y. Vazquez-Arroyo rightly reminds us, “colonization...included more than the violence of colonialism” (2010, 20). But to delink “the former from the latter is disingenuous at best: for the violence of pacification and conquest not only diachronically precedes colonialism, but it is constitutive of it” (Ibid). In different ways, both Ferguson and Pagden’s narratives feed the illusion that the violence of the past can be redeemed when one acknowledges the numerous benefits that have been brought by empire.
legacy – has been quite belated. This has been described as a glaring oversight considering that modern political thought has been profoundly shaped by the history of European expansion (Tuck 1994). Much of the recent work in the history of political thought has sought to correct for this omission by retrieving the imperial context of European political thought and showing how the problem of empire occupied a central place in the writings of canonical political thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, Burke, J.S. Mill, and Tocqueville, to name but a few. These studies have shown that the central concepts and languages of European political thought – “ideas of freedom and despotism, self-government, and the autonomous individual – were imagined and articulated in light of, in response to, and sometimes in justification of, imperial and commercial expansion beyond Europe” (Pitts 2010, 215).

In addition to situating the work of the major figures in Western political thought within a global colonial context, recent studies have paid particular attention to the ways in which various canonical thinkers responded to and sought to understand the diversity of cultures, practices and ways of life encountered during the long period of European expansion. Scholars have also focused on understanding the philosophical underpinnings of canonical, modern political thinkers’ stances vis-à-vis empire in an attempt to reconcile their more general political theory with their views on empire – which ranged from being either supportive or critical of empire, to being ambivalent. Perhaps the most prominent theme in recent studies devoted to the question of empire and imperialism in political thought has been the historical and theoretical relationship between liberalism and empire.

\footnote{For an excellent literature review of political theory’s contributions to the study of empire see Pitts (2010).}
In the past decade, a number of important studies have shed new light on the mutually constitutive relationship between liberalism and empire (Armitage 2004; Losurdo 2011; Seymour 2008; Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005). This work comes as a response to an older tradition in political theory that viewed liberalism as necessarily anti-imperial due to its commitment to equality, universal human rights, and self-government (Pitts 2010, 216). It has now become commonplace to argue that, historically, liberalism was not only coeval with empire, but that the imperialistic “urge is internal to it” (Mehta 1999, 20). Recent studies have tried to make sense of the fact that historically liberalism has been closely bound up with some of the most illiberal policies and practices: slavery, colonialism, genocide, and other forms of violence. As Debra Candreva puts it, “the paradox is that the universalistic elements in liberalism can lend themselves especially well to some highly illiberal practices” (2009, 317). Theoretically, scholars have struggled to understand the precise relationship between liberalism and empire. Given that “[l]iberals have been among imperialism’s most prominent defenders and its sharpest critics” (Pitts 2005, 4), many studies have framed their research around the following question: does liberalism inevitably lead either to empire or to anti-imperialism? For the most part, scholars have explored this question by looking at the internal logic of liberalism.

Amidst this recent wave of work dedicated to the problem of empire, three influential studies by Uday Mehta (1999), Jennifer Pitts (2005) and Sankar Muthu (2003) have invited much commentary. Where Mehta led the way in bringing to light the

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8 They emerged together; it was a twin birth, as Domenico Losurdo (2011) would say.

9 For some of the most recent arguments see Losurdo (2011); and Seymour (2008) who uncovers the history of liberal justification for empire.
“denied link” between liberalism and empire and thus offers a powerful contribution to the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism, Muthu and Pitts have sought to pluralize our understanding of 18th century Enlightenment thought and 19th century British (and French) liberal thought by calling into question the assumed homogeneity of these traditions.

Sankar Muthu’s *Enlightenment Against Empire* seeks to challenge prevalent understandings of the Enlightenment as a monolithic tradition, demonized by some (postmodern) scholars as a universalistic project that attempted to efface difference. Focusing on the political thought of a number of eighteenth-century authors like Kant, Diderot and Herder, Muthu uncovers in their writings incisive but underappreciated critiques of European imperialism. For Muthu, these three thinkers’ stances on empire are representative of a brief, “historically anomalous” (2003, 1) period of Enlightenment anti-imperialism that was preceded and followed by widespread arguments in support of empire. By studying the three Enlightenment thinkers’ stances on empire, Muthu unearths the philosophical assumptions and arguments that enabled their critique of imperial expansion. Specifically, he distills three sources of Enlightenment anti-imperialism: (1) a philosophical commitment to moral universalism; (2) a shared belief that all humans have what Muthu calls “cultural agency,” that is, a commitment to cultural pluralism that expresses itself in the recognition that all “human beings are fundamentally cultural beings,” i.e., that human beings are socially embedded and are not merely products of nature; (3) and an acceptance of some degree of moral incommensurability (2003, 268). As Muthu emphasizes, these three ideas not only yield a more inclusive, anti-imperialist political theory, they also productively resolve the
tension between the universal and the particular. As such, Muthu’s argument runs counter to the claims prevalent in much postcolonial scholarship which asserts a pernicious link between Enlightenment political thought and imperialism. Moreover, his argument also goes against those scholars like Uday Mehta who tend to portray universalism as inherently imperialistic and inhospitable to difference. For Muthu, it is Kant’s, Diderot’s and Herder’s commitment to a universal morality grounded in cultural pluralism that provides the antidote to empire.

Where Sankar Muthu traces the consolidation of late 18th century Enlightenment anti-imperial critique, Jennifer Pitts’s *A Turn to Empire* picks up where Muthu left off. Her book examines the transition from this widespread but short-lived assault on the idea of empire that had gained much ground by the 1780s to the displacement of such critiques less than half a century later by an “imperial liberalism that by the 1830s provided some of the most insistent and well-developed arguments in favor of the conquest of non-European peoples and territories” (Pitts 2005, 2). Like Muthu, Pitts concentrates on the views on empire of a number of prominent British and French political thinkers loosely grouped under the banner of liberalism, broadly conceived. Starting from the observation that liberals “have been among imperialism’s most prominent defenders and its sharpest critics,” the central theoretical puzzle of her study is to explain liberalism’s apparent flexibility on the question of empire (ibid, 4). That is, Pitts’s project is to explain the eclipse of a nuanced, “more tolerant and pluralist” liberalism (ibid, 21) and the emergence of an imperial liberalism strongly supportive of empire. Contra Mehta who argues that the exclusionary, imperial impulse is endemic to the liberal tradition, and contra those who maintain that liberalism is inherently anti-
imperialist, Pitts stresses that “liberalism does not lead ineluctably either to imperialism or anti-imperialism” (2005, 4). Indeed, Pitts finds it important to emphasize that the turn to imperial liberalism cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the internal logic of liberalism, nor on the grounds of “some set of basic theoretical assumptions in the liberal tradition” (ibid). Rather, she asserts that it was “historical pressures and their own philosophical commitments” that led many prominent thinkers in the liberal tradition to an overwhelming support of imperial ventures (ibid, 240).

Like Muthu, one of Pitts’s central concerns in the book is to show how the thinkers under study (in her case these include Smith, Bentham, Burke, Mill, Tocqueville, and Constant) represented, characterized, and judged non-European peoples (ibid, 6). Despite differences in focus and methods of explanation, both Muthu and Pitts – and here I would also add the work of Uday Mehta – converge in their emphasis on sensitivity to cultural pluralism, and respect and recognition of cultural difference as an important antidote to empire and to what Domenico Losurodo has called liberalism’s “exclusion clauses” (Losurdo 2011). In other words, and as Karuna Mantena has pointed out, the positive valuation and representation of non-European societies by the thinkers under study is seen by Pitts, Mehta, and Muthu as making available their anti-imperial stance. By contrast, the denigration of unfamiliar (non-European) cultures as “inferior” and “backward,” coupled with the lack of sensitivity to the violence and injustice of imperial ventures, is seen as conducive to the aforementioned liberal thinkers’ favorable stances towards empire. Such an attitude toward the “other” is what enabled J.S. Mill, for example, to argue that despotism is the
most appropriate form of government for peoples who were perceived as not having reached the highest rung on the civilizational ladder.

It is precisely on this point that the literature on empire can be brought into contact with CPT. In both cases there emerges a shared assumption that a sympathetic and favorable stance towards non-Western cultures yields a non-imperialist stance. It is also precisely on this point that Karuna Mantena’s *Alibis of Empire* challenges the work of Mehta, Pitts, and Muthu. While she acknowledges the importance of their calls for respect and recognition of cultural difference, Mantena demonstrates “the limits of invoking culture as a definitively anti-imperial gesture, as…the only corrective lesson to be learned from the history of liberalism’s vexed relationship to empire” (Mantena 2010, 184). As she persuasively argues, “there need be nothing contradictory about imperial self-justifications that speak in the name of cultural pluralism and cosmopolitan toleration” (ibid). Mantena is able to make this point by focusing on the late 19th century British experience in India and the work of Henry Maine. Her study traces the shift in the logic of liberal imperialism and the narrative of the civilizing mission, a shift characterized by a turn to culturalism that enabled the British to reframe and justify their continued rule in India “as a practice of cultural tolerance and cosmopolitan pluralism” (ibid, 178). The shift in imperial ideology was precipitated by the Sepoy mutiny of 1857. The rebellion, Mantena argues, was “a rude awakening and a deeply disillusioning affair” for the British that shattered their firm belief in the capacity of native peoples to be transformed and civilized along the lines of British (Western) society (ibid, 1). As

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10 Robert Bernasconi (2003) makes a similar point with respect to the relationship between (Kantian) cosmopolitanism and racism. On Bernasconi’s view, certain versions of cosmopolitanism coexists very easily with racism, and he even goes so far as to argue that they are constitutive of it.
Mantena argues, “the Mutiny was seen as a sign of the failure of liberal, utilitarian and evangelical reforms to either transform, civilize and emancipate the native or lend security to the imperial order” (2010, 4). The Indian mutiny, together with the uprisings that soon followed in Ireland, Jamaica, and New Zealand,¹¹ forced the British to fundamentally rethink the character and trajectory of their empire.

This period of crisis generated new modes of imperial legitimation, “ones that openly disavowed the moral discourse of liberal empire – the language of a civilizing rule and the goal of self-government” (ibid, 48). Influential in shaping the new, post-Mutiny approach to governance in the colonies was Henry Maine’s conceptualization of native society. Drawing on nineteenth-century developments in social theory and anthropology (specifically structural functionalism), Maine posited a distinction been traditional and modern societies (ibid, especially Ch.2). He conceived of traditional society “as an integrated social whole whose basis […] was recognized to have a logic and rationale of its own” (ibid, 150; 72). Characterizing traditional society “as a fundamentally apolitical society, structured by and through kinship ties and customary norms” (ibid), Maine defined native society through an opposition to modern, industrializing societies in the West which he conceived as based on a contractual order. In doing so, he not only highlighted traditional society’s difference from the dynamics of modern society, but also reinforced the sense of radical incommensurability between the two. What further cemented the radical difference between traditional and modern society was Maine’s theory of legal and historical development, which he described as a transition “from status [or custom] to contract.”

¹¹ The Fenian Rising in Ireland, the Maori Wars in New Zealand, and the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica.
Maine’s reconceptualization of Indian society as traditional allowed him to explain its resistance to liberal projects of reform and its hostility to modernization. Importantly, Maine’s “most original innovation” (Mantena 2010, 151) was his idea of native society in crisis. While Maine understood the transition from kinship-based communities to a social order premised on contract to be inevitable, he argued that British rule in India had “dangerously accelerated” this process, thus threatening to not only undo the customary basis of Indian society but also to make the country ungovernable (ibid, 121). As Mantena shows, “Maine’s warning about the potential trauma that contact with modern society portended for traditional societies led many imperial administrators to seek a solution in an alternative strategy of imperial rule – namely, indirect rule” (ibid).

Significantly, Maine’s warnings about the dangers posed to native society by British imperial rule did not mean that he (or his followers) rejected the project of empire. On the contrary. Since contact between Britain and India could not be undone, the task of the empire was retroactively reformulated so that the purpose of empire was now understood to be the protection of native societies and their institutions from impending dissolution. This new justification for continued British presence in India was accompanied by an active disavowal of what had gone before, namely, Britain’s role in disrupting native order.

Along with other contemporaries, Maine interpreted the 1857 rebellion as an “epistemic” and “anthropological” failure rather than as a political event. It was widely believed that the mutiny was as a “failure of the state […] to comprehend and predict the source and extent of native disaffection” (ibid, 153). The significance of this interpretation was twofold. First, such a reading refused to see the rebellion as a
political challenge to British imperial rule. Second, this interpretation “privileged and enabled the expansion of a particular form of knowledge – anthropological and ethnographic – as foundational to the late colonial state” (Mantena 2010, 154). Henry Maine argued that previous accounts of Indian social, political, and religious practices – especially those gathered by the leading Orientalists of the time – suffered from severe drawbacks, one of which (on Maine’s view) was their reliance on ancient texts as a guide to unlocking the secrets of Indian life and culture. As a corrective to what he considered a widespread failure to accurately understand Indian society, Maine advocated empirical knowledge and ethnographic methods of direct observation. In doing so, Mantena suggests, he was instrumental in redefining what constitute appropriate “colonial knowledge.” Where Orientalist scholars had derived their knowledge of Indian society and culture from the study of ancient Sanskrit texts, Maine redirected his contemporaries’ attention to the colonial administrative archive and its specific forms of knowledge – colonial settlement reports and other bureaucratic documents (ibid, 155-6).

In the Coda to her book, Mantena underscores the contemporary significance of her revised account of nineteenth-century imperial ideology, showing how its logic is “sequentially structured by moral idealism, culturalist explanation, and retroactive alibis for imperial rule” (ibid, 180). As Mantena persuasively shows, the same logic can be seen at work in the case of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Here we witnessed a similar sequential movement from a period of “aggressive and moralist rhetoric in favor of military intervention in Iraq” (ibid, 179), followed by growing disillusionment and culturalist explanations of the country’s failure to swiftly transition to democracy. Arguing
for the salience of Iraqi tribal systems, unearthing histories of ethnic conflict and sectarian division, and stressing the incompatibility between Islam and secular modernity, these explanations shifted the burden of failure “to the cultural capacities (or lack thereof) of Iraqis to reform or accommodate themselves to the norms of liberal democracy” (ibid, 180).

Historically, the shift of attention to the culture of the occupied populations has been a response to imperial crisis (Porter 2009). Where Mantena has shown how the shift in British imperial ideology was spurred by the Sepoy rebellion, which was interpreted as a specific kind of epistemic failure, Porter similarly makes the case that America’s strategic failures in Iraq and Afghanistan spring from a cognitive failure to understand the foreign societies in Asia and the Middle East. Citing Pentagon studies, Porter argues that cultural insensitivity played a significant role in fuelling the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan (Porter 2009, 9). As a result, cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and sensitivity towards local ways of life came to be touted as essential for reducing civilian casualties, defeating the insurgencies and winning the hearts and minds of the local populations. “Culture” was suddenly catapulted into the spotlight. Enter the Human Terrain System and its Human Terrain Teams (HTT).

**The Cultural Turn in the Military and the Human Terrain System**

When the US Army published the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24* (FM 3-24) in December 2006, Iraq was burning. After the American-led “Shock and Awe” campaign that toppled Saddam Hussein from power in 2003, and soon after former president George W. Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq, U.S. and coalition troops rolled into Baghdad only to be greeted with rocks and bullets rather than the expected flowers. Despite the White House’s reluctance to call the resistance
that enveloped the country an insurgency, all evidence pointed in that direction. As the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and U.S. forces were tasked to oversee the reconstruction and rebuilding of Iraq – a job that increasingly required them to leave the safety of the Green Zone and engage directly with the local population – it soon became apparent that they were completely unprepared for the task. For one, both CPA and military staff lacked the basic language skills and knowledge of Iraqi culture. For George Packer (2005, 224), a staff reporter for *The New Yorker* and veteran of four tours in Iraq, the pervasive miscommunication and misunderstanding he witnessed on a daily basis while on assignment in Baghdad meant that “[f]irepower and good intentions would be less important than learning to read the [cultural] signs.” Misunderstandings, mistranslations, and misappropriations formed the leitmotif not only of Packer’s *Assassin’s Gate*, but emerge as dominant themes in a number of books authored by journalists embedded in Iraq during the height of the insurgency.

Packer’s assessment of the situation reflected a growing realization amongst policy makers and members of the military establishment that “culture matters.” As the situation continued to deteriorate and Iraq was rocked by waves of insurgent violence, many attributed CPA’s failure to put the country back on its feet to Iraqi “culture,” to what was perceived as Iraqi reluctance and lack of enthusiasm to actively participate in

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12 A number of books provide detailed accounts of the level of inexperience and unpreparedness of the CPA staff, many of whom were charged with such tasks as writing Iraq’s new constitution, creating a stock market, and devising an entirely new education system from scratch. See, for example, George Packer’s *Assassin’s Gate*, Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, and Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*.

13 See, for example, Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (2008).
the CPA’s reconstruction efforts (see Rochelle Davis 2010).\textsuperscript{14} For others, however, the challenges U.S. forces faced in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom stemmed from the military’s “institutional disregard for the necessity to understand the people among whom [US] forces operate as well as the cultural characteristics and propensities of the enemies [the US] now fight[s]” (Kipp et al, 2006). Adopting a sharply critical tone, British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster went so far as to accuse the US army “of a lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity that amounted to unwitting ‘institutional racism’” (Burke 2011, 264). Since traditional methods of waging war had proved inadequate in Iraq and Afghanistan, culture, and cultural knowledge of the adversary, increasingly came to be seen as the missing piece, as the answer that would prove crucial for defeating the insurgencies and restoring peace.

It is against this backdrop of spiraling violence in Iraq (and Afghanistan) that the “cultural turn” was born. Quickly running out of options to stem the escalating violence, a group of self-described scholar-warriors came together to revive the dead spirit of counterinsurgency doctrine (COIN), a doctrine that had last been implemented with disastrous results in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{15} The result was the Counterinsurgency Field Manual, “a work of extraordinary influence, discussed on television and in newspapers and bought in quantities normally reserved for airport thrillers” (Burke 2011, 265). Written to promote counterinsurgency as the United States’ 21\textsuperscript{st} century strategy in the “war on terror,” in the words of one commentator the Field Manual was also “an

\textsuperscript{14} This argument was made despite the fact that it was precisely the CPA, under the leadership of Paul Bremer, that disbanded the Iraqi army, canceled elections, and removed all members of the Baath party from government and civil service posts thereby effectively excluding the majority of the population from participating in the reconstruction of their country.

\textsuperscript{15} First implemented in Iraq under Petraeus, counterinsurgency was introduced in Afghanistan by the Obama administration in 2009, where it had little tactical success (Belcher 2012).
acknowledgement of the strategic and tactical shortcomings of US operations” in Iraq and Afghanistan (Hevia 2010, 175). Advocating anthropological concepts and methods, the Manual placed emphasis on “cultural knowledge” as essential to a successful counterinsurgency. The manual was clearly oriented towards a public audience. Within the first month of its publication on the Marine Corps website, it was downloaded more than 1.5 million times (FM 3-24, xvii). Soon after it was picked up by Chicago University Press and became an Amazon bestseller, something highly unusual for a volume of its kind.

Input for the Field Manual came from a variety of individuals including: General David Petraeus; former Australian army officer David Kilcullen; British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster; Sarah Sewall, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; and a number of anthropologists, most prominent among whom was Montgomery McFate. McFate (2005), who was to become the founder and public face of HTS, drew on a number of observations made on the ground in Iraq from which she deduced the following conclusions: that the insurgency was a direct result of the military’s misunderstanding of the tribal nature of Iraqi culture and society; that the frequent killings of civilians by US troops at checkpoints and roadblocks was partly a result of the fact that the gestures for “stop” (arm straight, palm out) and “welcome” are reversed in American and Iraqi cultures; that the Americans had lost significant opportunities to influence Iraqi public opinion (win hearts and minds) because they had misunderstood that, unlike in the West, it was coffee shops rather than pamphlets or broadcast media that were more effective vehicles of information; that confusion over the meaning of local cultural symbols – such
as the flying of white and black flags – caused needless casualties (for example, Marines erroneously assumed that a white flag meant “surrender,” and consequently assumed that the Shia custom of flying a black flag meant the opposite).

The Field Manual 3-24 incorporated input of this nature. As Jason Burke observes, the subsequent debates sparked by the manual “amounted to a huge and public self-criticism session for the American military (Burke 2011, 264). Along with culture, COIN became the “new gospel” of members of the defense establishment. In the words of the late Michael Hastings, counterinsurgency doctrine attempted “to square the military’s preference for high-tech violence with the demands of fighting protracted wars in failed states” (Hastings 2010, 3). The basic points of the doctrine were quite simple: it required troops to make securing the civilian, rather than defeating the enemy, their top priority. As such, it directs US forces to live among the civilian populations and aid in the slow process of reconstruction. Humiliating, killing or otherwise injuring civilians, and damaging their property were now seen as actions that helped the insurgency. As such, the manual now counseled the use only of discriminate force. In short, its effect was to expand the military’s authority to encompass the humanitarian, diplomatic and political sides of warfare (FM 3-24).

A central theme running through the Field Manual is the repeated emphasis on recognizing and respecting the cultural specificity of a given population. In a striking gesture of cultural relativism, the Manual insists that,

Cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency. American ideas of what is ‘normal’ or ‘rational’ are not universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have different notions of rationality, appropriate behavior, levels of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender. Thus, what may appear abnormal or strange to an external observer may appear as self-evidently normal to a group member.
For this reason, counterinsurgents – especially commanders, planners, and small unit leaders – should strive to avoid imposing their ideals of normalcy on a foreign cultural problem (*FM 3-24*, 27).

As one commentator correctly points out, and as this passage makes clear, Petraeus’s manual was recommending a culturally relativist approach that was the diametrical opposite of “the belief in American exceptionalism and the confidence in the universal application of American values” that had been central pillars in the Bush administration’s security strategy after 9/11 (Burke 211, 266). The military’s widely publicized embrace of culture attracted considerable public acclaim. The shift towards culture-centric warfare was credited with the success of the 2007 surge in Iraq and the dramatic reduction in ethno-sectarian violence. Supporters of the program applauded the turn towards culture because it “encourag[ed] military actors to distance themselves from their own norms to imagine [the norms] of others” (Porter 2009, 193).

If culture was not part of the Pentagon’s vocabulary during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, by 2009 “cultural awareness” had become something of a buzzword among members of the defense establishment. To help address the shortcomings stemming from its neglect of culture, in addition to the Field Manual the US military began to take decisive steps towards redressing the cultural knowledge gap. Symptomatic of its newfound enthusiasm for all things related to culture was the sudden increase in “cultural awareness” courses and workshops offered at the nation’s military colleges. To help equip troops on the ground with the basic skills necessary to prevent instances of cultural “friction” and misunderstanding, the military began distributing a laminated “Iraqi Culture Smart Card” – a wallet-sized guide to Arab and Islamic culture complete with a list of dos and don’ts, illustrations and explanations of commonly used gestures, a break-down of Iraqi ethnic and cultural groups, male and female dress
codes, a list of commands and commonly used words and phrases. Studying the Smart Card one learns, for instance, that a “thumbs up” sign is considered obscene in Iraq and that what “we” consider as a perfectly clear hand gesture for “stop” actually means “hello” in Iraq.

Anthropologist Hugh Gusterson, a critic of the military’s cultural turn, sees the Smart Card as a misguided attempt to “smooth away misunderstandings between occupiers and occupied [in an effort to] produce frictionless encounters” (Gusterson 2010, 282). Gusterson worries that the Pentagon has adopted and operationalized an outdated concept of culture that treats culture as a “code to be cracked.” On Gusterson’s view, condensing Arab culture into a sixteen-panel, wallet-sized guide revives old Orientalist tropes that function to reduce Middle Eastern culture to a timeless, unchanging, and internally coherent entity (Gusterson 2010, 289). As Roberto Gonzalez (2007, 15) correctly points out, entirely absent from the military’s definition of culture “is the notion of culture as a product of historical processes.” This despite the fact that for the better part of the last three decades anthropologists have continuously shown how “cultures have been profoundly shaped by capitalism, colonialism and other political and economic forces on a global scale” (ibid).

Commenting on the limitations of the Smart Card, Derek Gregory observes that the panel describing the existing “cultural groups” in Iraq is exclusively concerned with ethno-sectarian divisions. This portion of the panel tells readers that “Arabs view Kurds as separatists [and] look down upon the Turkoman;” that “Sunnis blame Shia for undermining the mythical unity of Islam;” that “Shia blame Sunnis for marginalizing the Shia majority;” and that “Kurds are openly hostile towards Iraqi Arabs [and] are
distrustful of the Turkoman." What we get is a “flattened” account of local life where Iraqi culture is “reduced to a force-field of hostilities with no space for mutuality and transculturation” (Gregory 2008, 15).

Another curious attempt to find a solution to the friction of encounter is the U.S. military’s use of the “phraselator” – a handheld electronic device that translates between English and Arabic (as well as other languages). The palm-sized device “lets users speak or select from a screen of English phrases and matches them to equivalent pre-recorded phrases in other languages” (Harrison 2005, np). Apart from implying that the language of the ‘other’ is completely transparent and easily convertible to our own, commentators have criticized the phraselator for containing a limited repertoire of phrases. The device is useful, true, but only as long as one’s interlocutor uses those words stored in the phraselator’s memory.

The military’s interest in culture has also been accompanied by a turn to simulations. For example, *Tactical Iraqi* is an interactive language and culture learning computer game designed to provide soldiers with the requisite linguistic skills and cultural knowledge to prepare them to carry out specific operations. The player is a US soldier who must interact with Iraqis, and the object of the game is to gain the trust of the local population. As Derek Gregory points out, the virtual worlds depicted in these games are “staged in places of everyday life, not in an abstracted battle-space, but in

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16 According to anthropologist Rochelle Davis, the Smart Card gives readers a sense that the military’s definition of “culture” is restricted to a list of dos and don’ts. The soldiers and marines she interviewed told her that this list was not useful in their daily interactions with Iraqis. And yet, Davis writes, “this list of dos and don’ts is what they hold to be real truths about Iraqis and constitutes the basic and essential information that they know about Iraqi culture and society” (Davis 2010a, 302).

17 The Tactical Language and Culture Systems website can be accessed at: http://www.alelo.com/tactical_language.html
homes, neighborhoods and clinics and they require close, personal interaction with individuals, ‘face work’ that involves learning to read gestures and expressions” (Gregory 2008, 31). The shift to “interactive realism” is also evident in the construction of simulated Iraqi and Afghan villages in various parts of the United States. The military has recruited Arabic speakers, many of them from the Iraqi diaspora in the U.S., to act the part of the local populations. The aim, of course, is to recreate a sense of authenticity. Soldiers getting ready for deployment train in these prefabricated villages. As with the Tactical Iraqi game, the focus here is also on the successful interaction with the local civilian population and the development of cultural competence skills (see Gregory 2008, 27).

**Participant observers of empire: the human terrain teams.** The Human Terrain System emerged in the context of this broader trend to incorporate “cultural awareness” and knowledge of adversary culture into military operations. In an effort to support the United States’ counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. army launched HTS in late 2006, at first only as an experimental program. Often described as the gentler, kinder face of counterinsurgency, the program embeds small teams (known as Human Terrain Teams or HTTs) of social scientists with combat brigades in the two countries.\(^\text{18}\) The main purpose of these teams is to serve as cultural awareness experts on local populations and cultures. As of July 2011, there were 31 HTS teams deployed in Afghanistan and 10 in Iraq. These numbers were obtained from the official website of the Human Terrain System: http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/htsAboutHistory.aspx. By way of comparison, in 2010 a total of 27 HTS teams were deployed, 17 in Afghanistan and 10 in Iraq. These numbers come from a 2010 report mandated by Congress and conducted by the Center for Naval Analyses. An analysis and link to the report are available here: http://zeroanthropology.net/2011/02/19/declaring-the-u-s-army’s-human-terrain-system-a-success-rereading-the-cna-report/. A more recent search on the HTS website shows slightly different numbers. As per their website, by 2008 there were 28 HTTs in Iraq. As the US began to withdraw from the country, the website reports that all HTTs had left the country by June 2011. There are currently 20 HTTs in Afghanistan, a reduction from 30 teams in September 2012: http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/history.html.
advisors to the military. Specifically, their task is to help brigade commanders “understand and deal with the ‘human terrain’ – the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic, and political elements of the people among whom a force is operating” (Kipp et al 2006, 9). In addition to gathering ethnographic data and advising commanders about cross-cultural etiquette, according to the *Human Terrain Team Handbook* HTTs also

research, interpret, archive, and provide cultural data, information, and knowledge to optimize operational effectiveness by harmonizing courses of action within the cultural context of the environment, and provide the commander with operationally relevant, socio-cultural data, information, knowledge and understanding, and the embedded expertise to integrate that understanding into the commander’s planning and decision-making process (Finney 2008, 35).

In its early days, the program paid its employees upwards of $300,000 per year. The number has since been reduced but it is still in the six-figure range – much higher than an average salary of a tenured faculty member. HTT members receive military and weapons training before deployment at a site near Fort Leavenworth.19 Like the Field Manual, HTS received overwhelmingly positive coverage in the media and was heavily promoted as a program that “saves lives.”20 Supporters of the program claim that the use of embedded social scientists – part of whose tasks include interacting with local

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19 The first teams arrived in Afghanistan by February 2007 (Gonzalez 2009).

20 Roberto Gonzales (2009a, 101) writes that “there is no verifiable data that human terrain teams have saved a single life – American, Afghan, Iraqi, or otherwise.” In turn, Maja Zehfus (2012, 177) notes that “establishing how many civilians are *not* killed because of HTS involves a comparison with a counterfactual and is thus inherently problematic”. It is also important to note that the claim that HTS can reduce the death toll rests on the following assumption: it is argued that the purpose of human terrain teams is to promote understanding; as the argument goes, from this it follows that greater understanding will increase support for the institutions promoted by the United States. As Maja Zehfuss (2012) points out, this line of thinking frames resistance to the US occupation as a matter of cultural miscommunication. That is, this way of thinking assumes that Iraqi and Afghan resistance to US presence stems from an inability to understand the objectives of coalition forces in the two countries. What such arguments miss is the fact that resistance might stem not from a lack of sufficient understanding, but because Afghans and Iraqis, clearly perceiving what the objectives of the coalition are, may in fact object to it.
communities to build trust, understand their needs, and minimize cultural misunderstandings – has helped reduce violent interactions between the military and the occupied populations. One enthusiastic supporter of the program argued that the role of HTS social scientists is akin to that of a cultural translator, “[someone] who gives advice to soldiers about when not to cross their legs at meetings, how to show respect to leaders, how to arrange a party (Schweder quoted in Gonzalez 2009, 53). Others have expressed concern that HTS is an intelligence gathering program, and that rather than reducing lethal operations the work of HTTs may in fact be used to enable violence (Gonzalez 2009). Lastly, the death of at least three social scientists while on assignment with HTS has added even more cause for concern among academics.

Since the first public acknowledgment of the program in 2007, HTS generated a storm of controversy within the halls of academia. As Andrew Rubin (2012, 6) notes, “not since Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt had so many scientists and scholars been mobilized to record, analyze, and study the culture, geography, and history of a people who had not invited such scrutiny and invasion from abroad.” While the program employs social scientists from a variety of fields (including sociologists, anthropologists, area studies experts, and political scientists), it is anthropologists who have been the

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21 A frequently cited testimony to the effectiveness of the program is a statement made by Army Col. Martin Schweitzer (82nd Airborne Division) who claimed that he saw a 60% drop in combat operations after HTS personnel embedded with his units. There is no actual data to support this claim and the accuracy of these figures has not been confirmed (Price 2011, 96-7).

22 Specifically, some commentators have compared HTS to the infamous Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War. The program was designed to eliminate the Viet Cong “infrastructure” and resulted in the killing of thousands of suspected NLF members (Gonzalez 2009, 59).

23 The three social scientists include anthropologist Paula Lloyd, Johns Hopkins political science PhD student Nicole Suveges, and Oxford-trained political science PhD student Michael Bhatia.
most vocal critics and opponents of the program. As George R. Lucas points out, much of the HTS “controversy has been framed by anthropologists themselves… primarily as a matter of ‘ethics’ and ‘professional ethics’” (2009, 8; emphasis in original). Anthropologists have critiqued the military's appropriation of social science research methodologies, arguing that HTS personnel – who are supposed to gather information according to recognized social science research practices – fail to meet university standards, violate the fundamental principles of the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) code of ethics, and that their ethnographic work lacks scholarly rigor. Citing past misuses of the social sciences in Vietnam and Latin America, some have denounced the program as “mercenary anthropology” (Gonzalez 2007). The chief concern for anthropologists, therefore, has been how to safeguard the integrity of their discipline, and the knowledge it produces, from further militarization.

While the HTS controversy is technically “about” anthropology, (e.g., the appropriateness of anthropologists' involvement with the military's war effort), the debate holds wider ramifications for scholars of other disciplines as well, including political scientists and those who engage in any kind of fieldwork. While the reasons for the anthropologists' hostility to the program are many, we can isolate anthropology's

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24 The U.S. military has consistently highlighted the centrality of anthropological concepts and methods as crucial for waging successful counterinsurgency campaigns. From its inception, HTS has been pitched as a military anthropology. See, for example, *The Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (2007).

25 Absent from these discussions has been a willingness to “confront the ways that disciplinary ethics are linked to the political context in which anthropology is practiced” (Price 2011, 30).

26 With a few exceptions, political scientists have been notably absent from these debates. This is surprising given that the bulk of HTS recruits have degrees in political sciences rather than anthropology. For an engagement with the issue of the relationship between the military and academics from a political science perspective see the symposium in *Perspective on Politics* (Volume 8, Issue 4, 2010).
fraught relationship with the military as one important element that has shaped their response to HTS. Historically, anthropology carries the baggage of being closely linked to the colonial adventures of European powers. Many of the critiques leveled at HTS have charged that the program bears striking similarity to nineteenth century forms of indirect rule and, as such, that it “plays into the worst tradition of social science as a ‘handmaiden to colonialism’” (Gonzalez 2009, 37).

Other critics have questioned the HTS program’s “social engineering ‘soft power’ approach to manipulating other cultures,” arguing that it runs counter to widely established anthropological culture theory and practice (CEAUSSIC 2009, 43). From an epistemological perspective critics such as Roberto Gonzalez have questioned the appropriateness of engaging with civilian populations in a war zone, and have drawn attention to the potentially dehumanizing consequences of describing human beings as part of the cultural “terrain.” As Gonzalez suggests, equating people to a physical space that can be mapped opens the way for them to be viewed as a “territory to be captured, as flesh and blood terra nullius” (2009, 27).

Anthropologists have also critiqued the Human Terrain System from an ethical perspective. In particular, critics have charged that HTS not only violates anthropologists’ code of ethics, but that it is also profoundly incompatible with them. According Hugh Gusterson, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was able to condemn the work of HTS so quickly in part because the program stands in clear violation of four fundamental principles of AAA’s formal code of ethics: the directive to do no harm, the requirement of obtaining voluntary informed consent, the obligation to
other anthropologists, and the requirement of openness and full disclosure (Gusterson 2011).

Despite these critiques, the media continued to extol the new counterinsurgency doctrine and HTS. As Oliver Belcher observes, “academics, humanitarians and commentators alike fawned over the [COIN] strategy, with its emphasis on respecting ‘cultural difference’” (Belcher 2012, 260). While the media was heaping praise on this “humane” and “culture-friendly” approach to war, a different, darker reality was unfolding on the ground in Iraq (and Afghanistan): “A wholesale distribution of death was underway: over 100,000 civilian deaths from Coalition and insurgent forces, a destabilizing refugee exodus, the destructive urbicide in Fallujah, walled-off neighborhoods, long lines for gasoline, and a ubiquitous network of checkpoints and roadblocks” (Belcher 2012, 259). Critics of both HTS and the revived counterinsurgency strategy argued that all the hype and positive publicity surrounding the cultural turn only served to deflect attention away from the continuation of kinetic operations and the military’s role in provoking violence. According to geographer Derek Gregory, the description of counterinsurgency as “armed social work” and its portrayal as the “graduate level of war” served to reposition the U.S. military as a “culturally informed and ethically sensitive” bystander whose interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were deemed intrinsically therapeutic – not only for the local populations but also for the American public (see Gregory 2008).

For Gregory, the emphasis on the intellectual credentials of COIN doctrine and the media’s overwhelmingly positive coverage of HTTs worked to deflect responsibility for the ongoing violence onto the occupied populations. Violence was thus reconfigured
as a practice that had its origins in and was endemic to “their” history and “their” space. By contrast, the “impulse to understand is confined to ‘our’ space, which is constructed as open, unitary and generous: the locus of a hermeneutic invitation that can never be reciprocated” (Gregory 2008, 37). This move is perhaps best captured in the none-too subtle discursive shift from the October 2001 cover of Newsweek magazine “Why they hate us” to Time’s cover of March 2007 “Why they hate each other.” As Gregory astutely observes, in both cases the locus of the problem remains the same, i.e. the violence originates with “them.” But four years after the invasion of Iraq Time magazine has removed “us” from the situation altogether.

If the media has helped sugarcoat the work of counterinsurgency by presenting it as the gentler, kinder face of war, critics worry that “cultural knowledge is not a substitute for killing but rather […] a prerequisite for its refinement” (Gregory 2008, 4). In their assessments of COIN theory and practice, a number of commentators have noted how the new doctrine’s emphasis on cultural understanding is consistent with the (latent) Orientalism that has underwritten the “war on terror” and American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, Greg Feldman reads the Counterinsurgency Field Manual “as a form of Orientalist writing [that] does not recognize what Said and many other post-colonial thinkers have argued: that innocent, liberal minded social science aimed at appreciating cultural differences actually supports the administration (and thus subordination) of peoples living in geopolitically sensitive places” (Feldman 2009, 91).

Roberto Gonzalez, one of the founding members of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, argues that FM 3-24 “generally reads like a manual for indirect colonial rule” (Gonzalez 2007, xxxx). The manual is in fact fairly explicit about the sources from
which it draws inspiration. These include strategies of imperial policing borrowed from
the British experience in Malaya as well as “colonial teachings and the U.S. Marine’s
code of conduct for occupying Latin American nations” (FM 3-24, xxxiv). Moreover, the
Manual is littered with constant reference to the work of T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of
Arabia”). The prominent place Lawrence’s work occupies in the writings of some of the
chief advocates of COIN (including John Nagl and David Kilcullen) “repeats the classical
Orientalist gesture of rendering ‘the Orient’ timeless: calling on Lawrence to make sense
of modern Iraq is little different from expecting Mark Twain to be a reliable guide to

Knowledge Production Under Conditions of Empire

The recognition that a heightened appreciation for cultural difference – for the
ideas and traditions of thought of non-Western societies – can in fact be quite
compatible with imperial projects confronts the enterprise of CPT with a problem.
Clearly, there are vast and important differences between comparative political theory
and the Human Terrain System. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to suggest that
there is any kind of partnership, collaboration, or direct link between CPT and the
military’s HTS program. While HTS does employ social scientists, to my knowledge
(and based on recent statistics)\(^{27}\) these primarily include individuals with MA and PhD
degrees in political science, area studies specialists, and anthropologists, not

\(^{27}\) At present, I cannot provide up to date statistics. I came across a slide with the relevant numbers when
watching a video of a conference on HTS held on September 23, 2011 at Case Western Reserve
University School of Law. The slide revealed that most of the HTS employees held degrees in political
science and its sub-disciplines. The video has since been removed from the internet:
employed 417 individuals. Of these, only 6 held a PhD in anthropology and 5 held MAs in the same field.
The majority of employees hold degrees in political science and its subfields (CEAUSSIC 2009, 12; 60-61).
As such, only a very small number of anthropologists actually participate in HTS.
comparative political theorists. Nevertheless, it seems to me that non-participation and non-involvement in programs like HTS does not in itself automatically imply that one is free from complicity in larger structures of power. In fact, the knowledge that it is political scientists that constitute the bulk of HTS employees should give pause to those of us working in that discipline. The recognition that both CPT and HTS share important assumptions – a strong interest in foreign cultures and a belief that increased cross-cultural understanding can minimize, if not altogether eliminate conflict and bring peace – gives further reason for pause. While statistics are at best ambiguous regarding the extent to which human terrain teams actually help save or endanger lives, one thing that has been documented is that many HTS employees joined the program for humanitarian reasons, i.e. they undertook the pursuit of cultural knowledge “in order to do good, or at least to prevent a horrible situation from getting worse” (Zehfuss 2012, 183; Gonzalez 2009). We cannot dismiss their intentions as insincere, just as we cannot dismiss CPT’s interest in the study of foreign thought traditions as insincere or tainted by some unholy alliance with power. Where lies the problem, then? Why should CPT concern itself with the work of HTS? After all, apart from a few shared assumptions and interests, the two could not be further apart. Where one pursues non-violence primarily through engaging in dialogues with inanimate non-Western texts, the other pursues non-violence by engaging in dialogues with local Afghans (and until recently, Iraqis) while backed up by the most powerful military force in the world.

Allow me to formulate one answer to the questions posed above by way of a novel. In J.M. Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians the unnamed protagonist is a well-intentioned Magistrate leading a quiet and peaceful existence on the frontier of an
unspecified empire. When “the Empire” sends an army and an interrogation expert to the frontier outpost fearing an impeding threat from the “barbarians,” the Magistrate witnesses the army’s cruel treatment of the natives. He develops an especially strong hatred for one of the imperial officials – Colonel Joll who imprisons and tortures the “barbarians” in order to extract information that might help the Empire quell an impending rebellion. When the Magistrate returns a captured “barbarian” woman to her people, he is accused of treason and is imprisoned and tortured by Joll. Towards the end of the novel the protagonist comes to the realization that the torturer and the humanitarian are both necessary for the practice of empire: “I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more no less” (Coetzee 1980, 135).

CPT should take interest in the story of HTS because the latter serves as a potent reminder that “good will” – including the good will to dialogue and understand the “other” – does not operate in a vacuum, that is, it does not operate in the absence of social and political conditions that are required for communication to take place. What HTS brings into sharper focus are the broader structural conditions that make the openness of enterprises like CPT possible. It also shows, in the words of Andrew Rubin, “how brazen the connection between power and knowledge has become in [American] culture” (2012, 8). Just as Casteel’s Letters From Abu Ghraib revealed that the interrogator and the father confessor are two sides of the same coin, so too in Coetzee’s novel the humanitarian Magistrate and the torturer are ultimately revealed to be two sides of imperial rule. On this metric, HTS and CPT, through their shared
aspiration to avoid violence and bring peace, would seem to overlap almost perfectly with the humanitarian side of the imperial coin. But such a conclusion seems wanting. For to suggest that CPT, alongside HTS, is simply the lie that empire tells itself when times are easy, is to leave no room for the possibility of non-coercive knowledge. It is to suggest that knowledge, no matter how well intentioned, always serves power. Are we, then, inevitably bound to treat all knowledge as a form of power?

A slightly different answer suggests itself once we turn to the work of David Scott. In two important essays, written ten years apart, Scott discusses the rediscovery and reconceptualization by anthropologists and political theorists of the concept of “culture” as a site that promises to liberate both fields from their “service to imperial power” (Scott 2003, 111). In particular, Scott takes issue with the way both fields have embraced a definition of culture as “culture-as-constructed-meaning.” He casts doubt on the view that “culture,” understood as the domain of local and partial knowledge, has the capacity to undermine the West’s epistemological privilege (Scott 1992, 373). Specifically, in both essays Scott reflects on a certain “blindness” that, on his view, accompanies the “insight” that culture is not an unchanging whole. Scott points readers to a passage from Partha Chatterjee’s Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, which is instructive for the issues I have been examining here. Although the passage below considers the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding from the perspective of debates

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28 Scott offers the following challenge to the constructionist conception of culture by asking: “For whom is culture partial, unbounded, heterogeneous, hybrid, and so on, the anthropologist or the native? Whose claim is this, theory’s or that of the discourse into which it is inquiring? For surely on the very antifoundationalist grounds established by the new theory itself, the unboundedness or otherwise of culture cannot be something given but must, rather, be something that gets established in forms of authoritative discourse. So that whereas to stand on an a priori claim that culture is now partial rather than whole works well as a subversive claim turned against older essentialisms, as part of an ironic undoing of the meta-narratives of the West, it does less well as a principle upon which to seek a new positive yield for a politics of difference” (2003, 101).
in anthropology, Chatterjee’s text and Scott’s analysis of it are relevant for CPT as well. Indeed, in so far as scholars like Farah Godrej have urged fellow theorists to pursue fieldwork and employ methodologies and insights borrowed from their colleagues in anthropology, the paragraph below, which I reproduce in full, is particularly useful:

It is not trivial to point out here that in this whole debate about the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, the scientist is always one of ‘us’: he is a Western anthropologist, modern, enlightened, and self-conscious (and it does not matter what his nationality or the color of his skin happens to be). The objects of study are ‘other’ cultures – always non-Western. No one has raised the possibility, and the accompanying problems, of a ‘rational’ understanding of ‘us’ by a member of the ‘other’ culture – of, let us say, a Kalabari anthropology of the white man. It could be argued, of course, that when we consider the problem of relativism, we consider the relations between cultures in the abstract and it does not matter if the subject-object relation between Western and non-Western cultures is reversed: the relations would be isomorphic. But it would not: that is precisely why we do not, and probably never will, have a Kalabari anthropology of the white man. And that is why even a Kalabari anthropology of the Kalabari will adopt the same representational form, if not the same substantive conclusions, as the white man’s anthropology of the Kalabari. For there is a relation of power involved in the very conception of the autonomy of cultures (Chatterjee quoted in Scott 1992, 387).

Chatterjee argues that a relativist framework hides from view the non-reciprocal character of the ideological structure that makes anthropology possible. He also shows that the relations between cultures cannot be analyzed in the abstract. Nevertheless, as Scott correctly point out, Chatterjee’s observation does not at all imply the “end” of anthropology, nor should it lead us to conclude that the Kalabari cannot and should not seek to study (and study in) Western or non-Western cultures (Scott 1992, 387). Rather, Scott argues, Chatterjee’s text is useful in so far as it brings into view the “founding ideological structure of [anthropology]” (ibid). His text is relevant, because it shows that this structure “can neither be wished, nor criticized, away because its conditions are not merely the institutional ones governing the discipline… but rather the political and
historical ones that continue to shape the relations between the West and its Others…No one today can doubt either the radical disparity or the violent force of these relations” (Scott 1992, 387; emphasis added).

But if anthropology can neither “unhinge” itself from its history nor from the conditions it did not create, Scott suggests that it can nevertheless “transform the manner in which it works within [this structure] and the limits of the claims it makes” (ibid). As Scott proposes, the task ahead for any inquiry “into the cultural discourses and practices of people we study…must proceed by way of a continuous unmasking of the discursive and institutional conditions that make it possible.” In short, such a task “entails a continuous internal labor of criticism” (ibid, 388).

We may now repeat Chatterjee and Scott’s insights, substituting for their anthropologist the comparative political theorist. Our repetition would, then, look like this: It would not be trivial to point out, that in the debates about the status and purpose of comparative political theory, the comparative political theorist is always Western, modern, and self-conscious. The objects of her study are always “other,” non-Western texts and traditions of thought. In these debates few, if any, scholars have raised the possibility of a comparative understanding of the West by members of the “other” cultures. For example, no one has raised the possibility of an Afghan scholar doing a comparative political theory of the “West.” As Harry Harootunian (2005, 26) remarks apropos of area studies, “one of the most remarkable but unobserved occurrences invariably effaced by area studies is the obvious fact that peoples of the world outside of Euro-America have been forced to live lives *comparatively* by virtue of experiencing some form of colonization or subjection enforced by the specter of imperialism.”
Christopher Goto-Jones gets at the same idea when he asks why it is that we call it *comparative political thought* when we read the Japanese Kyoto School, but only *political thought* when we read the Frankfurt School (Goto-Jones 2011, 107). If we consider this problem from the point of view of relativism, it would not at all matter if the subject-object relation between Western and non-Western cultures (and traditions of thought) is reversed. Considered in the abstract, the relations would remain the same. But they are not. For just as there is a relation of power involved in the very conception of the autonomy of cultures, there is a similar relation of power in CPT’s tendency to posit the “non-Western” as a discrete, autonomous site of inquiry.

To point out that cultural relativism hides from view the structures of power that make CPT possible, and to point out that the relations between cultures (western and non-western thought) cannot be analyzed in the abstract way made available through hermeneutic philosophy, is *not* to call for the “end” of comparative political theory. Nor should this lead us to conclude that comparative political theorists must refrain from studying or engaging with non-Western thought. Rather, it is to argue that the founding ideological structure of CPT “cannot be wished away because its conditions are not merely the institutional ones governing the discipline, but also the political and historical ones that continue to shape the relations between the West and its Others” (Scott 1992, 387).

Just as anthropology cannot unhinge itself from its history, so too comparative political theory should not seek to detach itself from its own history. But this does not mean that it cannot transform the manner in which it works within the existing structure. To apply Raimundo Panikkar’s insights to CPT we might reformulate the meaning of
comparative political theory thusly: we might say that to “do” comparative political theory means radically criticizing the enterprise itself (Panikkar 1988, 136).  

Recall that apropos of the enterprise of comparative philosophy Panikkar (1988, 136) had said: “We do comparative philosophy not as an independent discipline, with adolescent urges of autonomy, but as a mature ontonomic activity of the human spirit, contrasting everything, learning from everywhere, and radically criticizing the enterprise itself.”

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CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters I discussed an exciting new development within the field of political theory, the emergence of a subfield called comparative political theory. I sought to trace the way in which the field has taken its present shape and internal organization, to show its pioneers and recent followers, its intellectual precursors and sources of philosophical inspiration. Apart from the Introduction and Chapter 1, all remaining chapters were organized around the broad thematic headings of “understanding”, “encounter”, “dialogue”, and “power”. Although they are not always theorized, these concepts were chosen because all (save one) occupy a central place in the CPT literature. The aim was not trace some kind of teleological progression starting from understanding and arriving at power. Instead, in each of these chapters I have sought to explore, deepen, and sometimes challenge the understanding of these concepts. The concepts themselves did not remain imprisoned within the structure of the chapters, but traveled and frequently overlapped with one another.

This sustained meditation had set itself the task of exploring the possibility, limits, and conditions that enable cross-cultural dialogue. While there are many “sites” that could have been chosen to explore this question, I sought to bring together two sites that exemplify well the 21st century’s desire for the so-called non-Western “other”: the broader field of CPT and the controversial Human Terrain System program. HTS stands out as a blatant example of the collusion between knowledge and power. With CPT what stands out is the, at times, overly naïve belief that learning more about another culture can improve understanding and eliminate conflict. The bulk of this dissertation focused on exploring the roots of CPT’s belief that dialogue and comparativism can act
as potent antidotes to power. To explore this foundational assumption, I began my journey with a return to CPT’s most immediate intellectual predecessors. Distinctive about the work Raimundo Panikkar, J.L. Mehta, and Wilhelm Halbfass is a recurring doubt – sometimes explicit, at times only implicit – about comparativism and its role in the pursuit of cross-cultural dialogue. All three thinkers expressed grave doubts about the comparative enterprise, but all three nevertheless did not abandon the project. But where these scholars had lingering doubts about the possibility of non-coercive knowledge, I sought to show that with the emergence of CPT these doubts were pushed aside.

Given that CPT describes its project as an attempt to move “beyond” Orientalism’s hegemonic and imperialistic modes of theorizing, in Chapters 4 and 5 I explored the way in which the exit from Orientalism was effected. In both chapters I critically examined two broad approaches that purport to offer an “exit” from Orientalism: deep immersion in the local cultural context and dialogic hermeneutics. The analysis of Jenco and Godrej’s arguments in support of immersion led to the conclusion that absent from their discussion is a theorization of the cross-cultural encounter. Despite the centrality of the trope of encounter in CPT, scholars have not adequately thematized the encounter.

As I have already intimated, CPT exponents take as given the circular, to and fro movement between self and other, or between Western and non-Western thought. We are told that an encounter with unfamiliarity entails a necessary self-dislocation, an immersion in otherness, and a subsequent return home. Although CPT scholars repeatedly emphasize that such journeys into the foreign and the strange can be deeply
unsettling and can cause much discomfort, they do not elaborate what happens in the “contact zone.” As the space of encounter, this is an important place that merits further exploration. I attempted to give some specificity to the encounter in the contact zone by turning to a real life encounter between an interrogator and a detainee.

In examining CPT’s proposed exit from Orientalism a second important element emerged. I showed that, following Edward Said, CPT scholars had similarly embraced a notion of Orientalism understood as a one-sided, monologic mode of theorizing in which the voices of the “other” are subsumed within Western categories and evaluative frameworks. Precisely because they accept Said’s account of Orientalism, CPT scholars have in turn sought to distance their own project from the Orientalist tradition that Said critiqued by proposing dialogue as an effective escape from Orientalism. As such, they end up positing dialogue as the diametrical opposite of Orientalism, here understood also as a form of power politics. Their rejection of Orientalism comes at the cost of preventing CPT scholars from recognizing some of the similarities their own project shares with the earlier Orientalist tradition.

It also prevents them from recognizing that in the Western context Orientalism also assumed the role of gadfly, which is also how CPT, at least on some accounts, sees its broader aim: to act as gadfly and challenge the status quo. Placing the search for an exit from Orientalism in relation to Heidegger’s notion of the Europeanization of the Earth, I suggested that a complete rejection of Orientalism constitutes an inadequate “escape.” Rather than a wholesale rejection of Orientalism, I proposed that CPT scholars look to their immediate intellectual predecessors for lessons about how to

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1 I borrow this term from Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2008).
negotiate their relationship to Orientalism. Such a move preserves the weight of history – including the living legacy of imperialism and colonialism that overshadows knowledge relations between the West and its Others – but it also keeps open the possibility that non-coercive modes of knowledge can be retrieved.

David Scott has noted that one of the paradoxical features of conceptual antagonisms is that “the determined rival to an existing hegemon, beginning with a bold and dramatic sense of contrast, and of critical distinctiveness, grows over the long course of seeking to overcome its nemesis, to look much like it” (Scott 2003: 92). To avoid becoming that which it seeks to reject, I suggested that CPT might borrow from Mehta the methodological principle of “repetition.” Repetition involves bringing out the unthought in what has already been thought by past thinkers. In the context of Orientalism, rather than an outright rejection of that tradition, this would mean uncovering the latent possibilities within that very tradition.

As mentioned earlier, CPT’s disavowal of Orientalism (also understood as power politics) has led scholars to draw a sharp division between dialogue and power. This conceptual division leads CPT scholars to neglect the power in dialogue, as well as to overlook alternative forms of Orientalist scholarship. To highlight the structural conditions that make dialogues possible, to raise a doubt that sympathy and a heightened appreciation for cultural difference will necessarily lead to more egalitarian knowledge relations between the West and non-West, in chapter 6 I situated CPT within a global framework of international relations, which has also enabled the emergence of the Human Terrain System. The juxtaposition and comparison between HTS and CPT in this chapter had as its aim the goal of deepening the critique I raised in Chapter 5,
namely, that the Gadamerian notion of dialogue embraced by CPT scholars leads them to portray the process of dialogic understanding as a bit too easy and smooth. The perspectivism that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics makes available to CPT, while valuable for the openness it fosters, also flattens the relations between self and other and blinds practitioners of CPT to the political and historical conditions that continue to shape interactions between self and other.

**Where to from here?** In a recent chapter published in *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices*, Christopher Goto-Jones (2013) notes that the uncertainty over its identity means that CPT confronts its death every day. He further notes that CPT has covered over this anxiety with an almost missionary zeal: “[its] proclamations of inclusivity and globality go hand-in-hand with accusations about the exclusivity and ethnocentrism of the disciplinary mainstream” (2013, 158). The purpose of this dissertation has been to temper CPT’s missionary fervor. As I suggested in the concluding section of the previous chapter, to point to the weaknesses of the enterprise is not synonymous with calling for its end. What I do wish to suggest is that it may very well be the case that the only way of “doing” comparative political theory in a mindful manner would mean radically criticizing the enterprise itself. It would mean “continuously unmasking the discursive and institutional conditions that make it possible” (Scott 1992: 388).

One way forward that would enable CPT scholars to be more attentive to the issue of power is to engage with the literature on empire in political theory. Both projects share in common an effort to globalize and provincialize political thought. Where CPT has called for the inclusion of non-Western voices into the Western canon, the empire
debates have opened political theory to a global context by placing the work of canonical Western thinkers in relation to the broader global dynamics they responded to and addressed. For CPT, grappling with this tradition would mean grappling with the ways in which the central categories of political theory were structured by the imperial encounter. To begin to see the political thought of the modern West as – at least in some measure – inseparable and deeply bound up with empire, as a product of the global domination of the West and the challenges to its domination from the rest of the world, would mitigate the flattening effects of CPT’s embrace of Gadamerian perspectivism.

This dissertation also opens the possibility for a renewed engagement with the Orientalist tradition. It suggests the possibility for rethinking the politics of Orientalism along different lines than those suggested by Edward Said. Put differently, such a research program would entail exploring in greater depth the work of early Orientalist scholarship that Said knowingly excluded from his study, including but not limited to the following: Max Muller, A.H. Anquetil-Duperron, William Jones, the Schlegel brothers, Ignaz Goldziher, and Louis Massignon, among others. Although such studies already exist, they have yet to be undertaken from a political theory perspective. With the exception of Meghan Thomas’s (2010) article and F.G. Whelan’s (2001) exploration of Anquetil-Duperron’s response to Montesquieu, to my knowledge there are no full-length studies of the history and politics of Orientalism in political theory.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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